

State Formation and Radical Democracy in India

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xii *Acknowledgements*

This book is dedicated to my parents and sister who have waited patiently; Lucia, friend and mentor; and Kautsky, my Labrador companion, who has been rather more impatient.

The book is in memory of the courageous women and men of Kerala who dared not only to dream but to carry their dream forward. We can only hope that in the present *zeitgeist* we do not lose sight of how much was won.

1 Old legacies, new protests

Welfare and left rule in democratic India

Introduction

Democracy is the new politics of this century, polyvalent, but indispensable as rhetoric and form. Yet the age-old question of the relationship between formal, representative democracy and substantive democracy, or in Amartya Sen's now famous terminology, 'capabilities and entitlements',¹ remains stubbornly obscure, if never more relevant. The neo-liberal state and formal democracy are increasingly taking isomorphic forms, diffusing across the globe as part of the 'ideal' state. In this context, the question of how different forms of citizenship, including popular protest, can make substantive changes in the life chances of the poor remains pressing. Put another way, the question is: under what conditions can various 'subaltern' classes successfully use formal, representative democracy to achieve basic and crucial freedoms and life-saving entitlements, whether it is land, food, education, medicine, health care or minimum wages? Can popular movements and insurgent associations undermine persistent inequalities from within the norms and practices of formal democracy?² Undoubtedly, these questions require us to ask whether formal democracies can accommodate fruitful democratic struggles – in support of broad popular interests within a democracy.

Contemporary discussions of globalization have probed the forms of resistance that might challenge its hierarchies and distortions. However, in privileging transnational contention, many such discussions elide the specific historical experiences of different societies, and how they influence local struggles. The result in such cases is a discussion abstracted from the challenges that earlier social movements faced, their specific successes and failures, that powerfully frame contemporary struggles. The present, then, forms the entry-point of this book as it asks about one sub-section of the global disillusionment with the limits of poverty alleviation strategies – namely, why did anti-colonial party-led movements, and later governments, despite the strong promise of redistribution and justice attached to these movements, reach an impasse in delivering substantive democracy or, in Sen's terms, basic freedoms, capabilities and entitlements?

To address this question, this book takes up a comparative examination of a nominally *successful* case, an 'anomaly' in the Weberian sense of defying the

norm – namely, the state of Kerala in southern India. This region of India is one of the most closely examined cases of developmental change in the twentieth century, indeed, perhaps *the* most widely acclaimed ‘model’ of successful development³ other than the East Asian ‘tigers’.⁴ Kerala’s substantial gains in reducing poverty, at least until the early 1990s, has made it a crucial case for development studies scholars, but its significance for understanding the question of the general failure of post-colonial states has not been adequately investigated. Even today, Kerala’s trajectory is of great interest as the debate over the capacity of neo-liberal policies to eradicate poverty continues to rage. As Kerala’s earlier solutions to reducing poverty have run into trouble, and the left seeks a self-renewal, the political possibilities ahead are being debated furiously. Can democratic popular protest create representative organizations and push states to provide basic entitlements, capabilities and functionings to the poorest as was at least once attempted in Kerala? Or has this model run out of steam in Kerala, thus signalling trouble for it in other locales? If so, what are its implications for the democratic route to poverty reduction? Are parties relevant actors anymore? Can social movements make substantial strides in increasing substantive democracy without participating in the sphere of formal democracy? These questions cannot be answered in the abstract; it is necessary to grapple with real experiences, triumphs and failures, and make sense of them. Answers must also be sought in the past.

Those who have followed Kerala’s trajectory are familiar with the large advances in literacy, health-related indices of welfare such as mortality rates, land redistribution, economic justice through minimum wages and social security, and not least the demographic breakthroughs that resembled European transitions from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. While the role of the state in East Asia has been examined in great depth, in India it is often assumed that the state has largely failed. But in Kerala, each achievement was the product of state policy, whether in the colonial or post-independence era. Indeed, long historical continuity in the state’s role in implementing ‘welfare from above’ in the colonial and the post-colonial eras is itself quite stunning, and deserves sustained treatment. It will allow us to better understand both why the post-colonial state (and regional states) in India have failed to approach the levels of Kerala’s achievements, and whether Kerala’s own achievements and present dilemmas are a direct product of state strategies dating back to the colonial era.

The period between 1957, when the communists first came to power, and the contemporary period has been the topic of a vast industry of Kerala studies. Kerala has been approvingly cited by left radicals and UN policy-makers alike, each group making sense of Kerala’s trajectory through its own specific lens. But the flurry of praise for Kerala’s record that emerged by the 1980s flattened critical debate and historical nuance into simple narratives that were repeatedly invoked. Not least was the unfortunate term ‘Kerala Model’, which appeared to present a utopianized vision of redistributive strategies, counterposed to ‘growth-oriented strategies’. This in turn gave rise to a large number of studies stimulated by

admiration for Kerala’s record, which provided little idea of how Kerala achieved comparable gains while no other region of India, not even left-ruled West Bengal, could manage the same. Indeed, no single work addressed the question, paraphrasing Weber, how did Kerala become *so* and not any other way? One can easily conclude that there has been a near mythologization of Kerala in the development literature. There are a number of important exceptions, of course: these include Peter Evans’ *Embedded Autonomy* (1995), Patrick Heller’s *The Labor of Development* (1999), and Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke’s *Local Democracy and Development* (2000), all of which have addressed the relationship between democracy and development in Kerala in the contemporary period, centring their attention on left policies and the making of these policies.

Where this book departs from these aforementioned studies is in going beyond a focus on the rise and rule of communists in the state, towards a more disaggregated as well as comparative analysis of the long twentieth century in Kerala. It connects events that are often treated separately – colonial penetration, decolonization, and post-colonial rule. Together, this theoretical treatment addresses the question of what is politically possible in post-colonial contexts, placing a great deal of emphasis on the emergence and effects of political practices within given structural constraints. Here, the question is how modes of colonial state rule and state formation affected politics, the character of civil society, and the effects these two factors had upon emergent social movements. Disentangling these is not an easy task, and undoubtedly much more could be written about each of these issues. The book does not attempt to be comprehensive in its coverage of each period; rather, its purpose is to pose some analytical questions that may help to think through a number of problems of post-colonial societies.

The book highlights a comparative question that has long been neglected in the literature, namely, why have successive left governments of West Bengal, where the same left party (the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI-M) has ruled consistently, not achieved the same demographic advances, standards of living for its workers and agricultural labourers, and improvements in public health, to name a few policy areas. In posing this question at the heart of its analysis, the book’s innovation is to historicize and concretely specify the role of the left in Kerala’s development trajectory. But it is equally important to ask whether the left in either Kerala or Bengal *could* have done more than it did; to what extent were the limitations of the left largely externally driven; for example, did colonial repression drive a particular type of leftist mobilizing strategy? In the post-independence period, did the quasi-federal system limit what the left could strive for either financially or programmatically, and to what extent were its limits ideological or programmatic? In particular, were these limitations a product of a particular kind of leadership, a failure to evaluate the political possibilities of the time (during and immediately after decolonization), or more generally a reflection of the failure of communism globally? Although the latter point has been repeatedly invoked in criticisms of the left in India, it is crucial for us to

retain our focus on how these ideological-programmatic principles met conditions on the ground, and were translated into actual practices. Hence the focus of this book on political practices. In addition, apart from the comparative focus of the book, the long historical period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is necessary in order to ascertain the level of 'autonomy' of the left. This is possible only, as this book argues, if we cut across the sacred divide of 1947, the year in which India won independence from British rule, and link pre-independence political structures and politics with post-colonial ones.

Why focus so closely on the left? After all, one may argue that there are very few traditional left parties that hold power in any part of the world, and their historical relevance may be in serious question. It is important to note that despite the nomenclature of communist party, the parliamentary left in India is Stalinist in rhetoric, but ever-flexible (some say too flexible) in politics. To understand the parties of the left one has to examine what they *do* rather than what they say. Their own practices have determined their electoral significance, however regionally limited (although in 2004 they rejected a place in the power-holding coalition with the Congress Party, and opted to support it from the outside), which has been won through greater resemblance with the Social Democratic Party in Sweden than, say, with the Chinese Communist Party. The left in India has adopted a pragmatic stance on electoral coalitions as well as neo-liberal policies, seeking to attract foreign investment – but its social base and ideological commitments mark it as fundamentally different from the Congress Party, the long-standing centrist mass party in India. An equally significant division is that between the growing realm of non-party affiliated social movements and non-governmental organizations, and the traditional left constituted by the CPM and CPI to a more limited extent. But because of the absence of these movements from any political coalitions governing or seeking to govern, the CPM in India remains the crucial focus for any study seeking to ask about progressive parties and movements that hold state power.

In summary, the substantive focus of this book is to enquire into the continuities and ruptures in the realm of politics and state formation in Kerala and Bengal, seeking (1) to evaluate the complex legacy that British colonial rule (direct and indirect) created for left-led post-colonial reform, and (2) to understand what difference left-led mobilization and rule made to the respective social regimes in the two cases. Other comparisons, particularly with colonial policy, left-led political struggles and agrarian structures in Maharashtra, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, are used to 'discipline' the analysis of specific historical sequences within Kerala and Bengal.

Kerala's anti-poverty policy regime

In 1957 democratically elected communists in Kerala, defying the anti-democratic experiments then prevalent, but equally the development failures in much of the 'third world' in successive decades, forged what Esping-Andersen

(1990) has called 'politics against markets'. By the 1980s, the far-reaching networks of social security and direct welfare entitlements, relatively high minimum wages, public distribution of food, and widely accessible health-care and literacy programmes had led to a spectacular record of social development in the state, generating widespread attention and praise.⁵ Other paradoxes followed – their repeated victories (and defeats) in a fiercely contested parliamentary democracy, the pro-labour policies, land reforms (that is, a general prioritization of redistribution in a largely capitalist economy⁶), and an association with, and leadership of, movements for social reform – which gave the communists a strong reputation as a party of social change.

These interlocked policies constituted what Przeworski (2000) has called a 'policy regime' – a set of policies that all competing and governing parties in successive decades uphold, regardless of their political affiliations. These institutionalized entitlements – which arguably remain a part of the political 'pact' in Kerala, despite many recent transformations in policy – spelled the unprecedented politicization of subordinate classes, and a resulting infusion of politics with radical demands for democratization through what Amartya Sen has called 'capabilities and functionings'.⁷ The social security and egalitarian land and wage policies allowed for a demographic breakthrough paralleled only in the first world, an attendant and remarkable growth in 'social development', and a drop in poverty rates. Entitlements became instruments of shifts in social structures, belying the concept of 'poverty alleviation' in the language of the Indian state and multilateral agencies – which provide an image of top-down relief rather than long-term transformation through the deepening of democracy. Policies, to borrow from Esping-Andersen (1990), had class forming effects, and served furthermore to create and cement class alliances.

With the emerging 'pro-market' consensus through the 1980s, the very same low to moderate economic growth rates that were once seen as no constraint to development came now to be viewed as *the* problem, and the emphasis on social development increasingly blamed for Kerala's economic malaise. Many scholars and observers began to argue that governmental (leftist) neglect of economic productivity, far too embedded working class radicalism, and a complacent and poor work ethic are the root causes of the problem – and thus the issue circled back to whether the intervention of the left in Kerala has been a more or less misguided enterprise.⁸ In partial answer to this question, this book brackets the notion of communist autonomy, viewing left party rule and reform as part of a longer historical process in which state formation and notions of state welfarism were created and perpetuated by the communists. Thus, while the centrality of communist-led class formation for Kerala's post-independence land and labour reforms is clear, policies regarding the spread of literacy and health care ironically have precedents in its colonial past. As various scholars of the welfare state have pointed out, social policies are often driven by conservative governments (Esping-Anderson 1990). It follows that the political origins of

welfare policies in Kerala are not entirely divorced from its colonial origins. Ironically, some of these legacies also undoubtedly had democratizing effects.

A comparative glance at West Bengal suggests, on the other hand, that its CPM-led governments have not implemented such far-reaching reforms. Their most significant and widely publicized reforms are Operation Barga (which granted sharecroppers titles to land⁹), ceilings on land sizes, support programmes for sharecroppers such as low interest loans, and wage and employment schemes for landless labourers (Dasgupta 1984; Kohli 1989). There is considerable controversy about the extent to which these programmes have succeeded – and some scepticism about the political will that the CPM-led governments have applied towards implementing the reforms (Dasgupta 1984; Kohli 1989; Mallick 1993). Mallick (1993), for instance, argues that Operation Barga has only benefited the more substantial sharecroppers (a ‘new middle landed class’) that form the basis of electoral support for the CPM. Moreover, statistics show that with insubstantial welfare and poverty alleviation programmes, the social indicators of development such as literacy rates, mortality, life expectancy, etc. are not too different in West Bengal from those in the rest of India, with the exception of the poorest ‘Hindi-belt’ states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (see Table 1.1).

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 show significant differences between the two states with regard to social development and hence policy regimes, although as can be seen from Table 1.2 Bengal had a higher rate of economic growth than Kerala during the 1990s. However, Kerala’s economic growth jumped from a mere 0.5 per cent during the 1980s–1990s, to an impressive 5.8 per cent. Indeed, more recent discussions of Kerala’s economic crisis are beginning to accept that there has been a clear turnaround during the past five to six years (Kannan 2005; Mathew 2005). While the infant mortality rate has decreased in Bengal over the past few decades, the rate of decline has not been particularly high, surpassed even by some of the poorest states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and richer ones such as Gujarat, none of which are known for their pro-poor policy orientation. The same picture holds for literacy rates – the rates of change are not very different from other parts of India. As Haris Gazdar notes (1992: 194), ‘it is striking, indeed, that energetic activism on the agrarian-reforms agenda went alongside a

Table 1.1 Select indicators of poverty: Kerala, West Bengal, and all India, 1990s

	<i>Sen poverty index</i>	<i>Literacy rates (%)</i>	<i>Female/male literacy rate ratio</i>	<i>Under 5 mortality per 1,000</i>
Kerala	0.13	89	0.93	40
West Bengal	0.24	51	0.75	139
All India	0.18	45	0.61	117

Source: Shariff (1999).

Table 1.2 Capabilities and functionings, Kerala and Bengal compared, 1991–2001

	<i>Kerala</i>	<i>Bengal</i>
Population, 2001 (millions)	32	80
Growth rate of per capita SDP, 2000–01 ¹ (% per year)	5.8	6.8
Life expectancy at birth, 2000 ² (in years)	76 (female) 71 (male)	64 (female) 63 (male)
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	14	51
Death rate, age 0–4, 1991 ³ (per 1,000)	4.1 (female) 4.5 (male)	20 (female) 20 (male)
Estimated maternal mortality rate, 1987–96 ⁴ (per 100,000 live births)	negligible	458
Literacy rate, age 7+, 2001 (%)	88 (female) 94 (male)	60 (female) 77 (male)

Sources: Census of India 2001.

http://www.censusindia.net/results/2001census_data_index.html

1 Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/health/infofiles/life.htm>

2 Source: http://www.macrosan.com/fet/aug03/fet100803SDP_1.htm. Figures are approximations.

3 1991 figures taken from Dreze and Sen 1991: Table A3 (appendix).

4 Figures from Bhat 2001: 11.

near total absence of initiative in public policy on other factors that influence well-being’. It is this difference in state capacities, and their historical and political determinants, that is the prime interest of this book.

Central questions of the book

This book begins with the critical question of the impact of British colonial rule on popular insurgency and its legacies for future regimes in post-colonial Kerala. This is because to some extent state capacities in the direction of popular welfare were also shaped during the colonial era. Thus the relevant historical sequence for this book is between 1860 and the late 1990s. This sequence captures the full effects of British policy on Kerala and its shadow comparison Bengal, especially the peculiarity of nineteenth-century state reforms in the princely states of colonial Kerala (Travancore and Cochin), and the peculiarities of Kerala’s social structure, all of which could potentially go a long way towards explaining its anomalous trajectory. In other words, even within Kerala’s own historical trajectory there are at least two alternative explanations of its unique outcomes: (1) the princely state policies of the nineteenth century were the first to create Kerala’s divergence from the rest of India, and are thus the primary cause of its ‘exceptionalism’, or (2) communist-led mobilization and governmental policies

in the pre- and post-independence periods were primarily responsible for its exceptionalism. By and large, scholars who have emphasized Kerala's 'civic associational' traditions or communist party-led mobilization (Heller 1999; Isaac and Franke 2000) in democratizing development tend to ignore the fact that the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin had implemented land, education and health-care reforms during the nineteenth century, leading to Kerala's divergence from India well before the post-independence era. These reforms accompanied the increasing penetration of the state in civil society. Arguably, without these quasi-Bismarckian policies, many aspects of Kerala's development might have looked no different from other directly and indirectly ruled regions of colonial India. The evidence from Bengal appears to support such a view, for, without similar state legacies, communist rule has not produced comparable reductions in poverty.

Yet the evidence from Kerala suggests the crucial importance of communist mobilization, networks and rule in extending and maintaining the state's welfarist orientation. This book's second crucial question, therefore, is: how did the political practices of left movement and party activists between 1934 and the late 1990s – relative to inherited 'objective' circumstances – affect the formation (and later, potential 'crisis') of a distinctive anti-poverty regime in Kerala? In other words, what effects did the political practices associated with the early and late left in Kerala have on its distinctive regime of anti-poverty welfare, and what new limits did these practices pose on Kerala's political economy? A basic premise of this book is that Kerala's uniqueness has to be understood as a historical confluence of changes and continuities at three levels – state, regime, and government.

Three puzzles

A focus on Kerala helps us to resolve three crucial comparative puzzles. First, why has its policy regime – weighing more heavily on the side of redistribution rather than accumulation – diverged so significantly from that of the rest of India (whose record has been sluggish on both counts)? It is well known that India's fractious political scene has not produced an appropriate environment for reducing mass poverty. One influential theory characterized the Indian state as 'regulatory (and hence patronage-dispensing) rather than developmental', suggesting that most constraints on growth have been imposed by the politically organized and articulate dominant 'proprietary classes' (Bardhan 1984). This dominance has a strong political lineage in the form of the Congress Party. Like Mexico's PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), the Congress Party in India has dominated the shape of India's democracy and its developmental strategy. The Congress party led the anti-colonial movement against over 200 years of British rule, culminating in India's independence in 1947. From its formation in 1885 by a small group of lawyers and other professionals, the Congress Party had by 1947 grown into a mass organization with branches in even the most remote

districts and villages. This was owed in no small part to the leadership skills and tactics of Mahatma Gandhi, who took the elite party through its passage to mass movement by, among other things, speaking in the idiom of poor, illiterate peasants. However, despite the tumultuousness of the anti-colonial movement, and the mobilization and radicalization of all sectors of Indian society, it is a salient feature of Indian political life that workers and the lower peasantry have failed to make a dent in patterns of accumulation and distribution. That they have done so in Kerala is of much comparative interest. As most political-economic analyses of post-independence India have concluded, *class* has been a relatively weak line of conflict when compared with caste, religion or ethnicity. '[C]lass politics has not been and is not likely to become the principal medium for representing India's "weaker sections"', note Rudolph and Rudolph (19687: 20). More recent discussions of Indian politics, social movements and parties echo this earlier view; rather than class it is caste and ethnicity that organizes political protest (Ray and Katzenstein 2004). If so, then why and how, given the enormous caste hierarchy in the region, and the extreme methods of social exclusion – and thus the obvious role of caste in political conflict – did Kerala's often lower caste agrarian and industrial workers come to make class-based claims and effectively stake a share in Kerala's future pattern of accumulation?

Scholars are beginning to turn more closely to a study of the political stalemate created in India by a weak state and contending political interests, not least among the rural elite (Chhibber 2003; Jenkins 1999). First, there is the issue of 'state capacity', which is characterized as weak in the Indian context. The concept of state capacity draws upon the Weberian notion of a rationalized administration, of an insulated bureaucracy, embedded networks between state and society (capital and labour particularly) (Weiss and Hobson 1995). Weakness and strength are of course relative evaluations, and as such have no independent meaning; yet there is an implicit comparison to western, democratic states which have evolved state capacities through democratic struggles against the feudal capture of state institutions. In post-colonial states, this concept is more complicated, as administrative institutions were established as part of colonial rule and as such did not simply mimic the development of western states. In colonial states, and to some extent as a legacy in post-colonial states, the repressive capacity is better developed than its 'infrastructural' capacity. We will need to evaluate why the latter was developed so strongly in Kerala.

The second point of divergence is that of redistributive politics and the push 'from below', which in India has been comparatively quite weak. Several explanations exist to explain this. On the one hand, the Congress Party is itself blamed for its 'class conciliatory', 'non-violent and incremental approach' to glaring questions of class inequality (Frankel 1978; Kohli 1987: 54). Among Marxist and other leftist scholars, Gandhian ideology and strategy has been given a good share of the blame for suppressing popular radicalism within the nationalist movement (e.g. Sarkar 1983). Others have blamed weak left party strategies, that is, the economic determinism and consequent rejections of

'subaltern' consciousness, which resulted in the failure to tap the radical potential that existed in India.¹⁰ It is argued that the left's (communists') failings during the anti-colonial movement have carried over into the post-independence era (Chandavarkar 1997; Vanaik 1989). Futile debates over the 'real' character of the Indian state and the Congress Party, it is argued, have allowed the communists to remain weak even when popular discontent against the Congress Party surged.

To understand what share of the blame should be placed at the door of left parties, who undoubtedly had a significant political opening at a crucial moment of modern Indian history, one must ask whether alternative trajectories that might have led to the dominance of subaltern movements within the incipient state were possible at the time. Such an analysis would have to account for the complexity of the 'objective conditions' obtaining in India, and its enormous regional variation, and the *potential* for radical movements to develop. Thus far, few proponents of the 'weakness of the Indian left' thesis have attempted to ask whether alternative strategies would have necessarily ensured their dominance. Instead, scholars of India's anti-colonial nationalism have displayed a tendency to swing between structuralism and voluntarism. Debates veered between the 1970s 'mode of production' arguments that sought to determine whether the Indian formation was capitalist or some hybrid between pre-capitalism and capitalism, towards a renewed interest in subaltern forms of resistance and fragmented histories. This sometimes compelling body of work focuses beneath the 'radar' of formal politics, avoiding discussion of the outcomes of political contention, and the vast changes that have occurred in the forms of subaltern resistance ranging from those in the formal party sphere, to the more localized and micropolitical.

This book is situated somewhere in the middle of these two bodies of work. It takes up the case of Kerala for in-depth historical exploration to pose the question of why and how its 'exceptionalism' emerged, and whether this trajectory was possible in other regions of India (or the third world). It opens up a distinct anomaly, namely, that left parties generally failed to break ruling class domination in the course of anti-colonial movements (except in the few cases where they led revolutions), but they did succeed in doing so in Kerala. Opening up this question suggests that the suppression of radical possibilities in most post-colonial cases may lie in the nature of colonial rule itself, in part through state repression, and in part through the persuasive force of what Gramsci called a 'passive revolution'. By this term he meant the creation of a vast political revolution which, however, maintained conservative social structures and the dominance of the propertied classes. The passive revolution was in no small part a product of the changes encouraged by the British in Indian political expression and representation. A vast literature has documented the difficulties that radical popular resistance faced within the Indian anti-colonial struggle, defeated partly by strategies of isolation on the part of left leaders, but also because of persistent repression by the British. Furthermore, their encouragement of the channelling of discontentment through the Congress Party (until it grew into a mass movement)

had the consequence, for a variety of complex reasons to be explored in this book, of co-opting and mopping up radical alternatives to the Congress Party. Seen in this light Kerala is a distinct anomaly, as the communists gained ascendancy *within* the Congress-led nationalist movement in the region.

A final anomaly that merits explanation is why the rigid and hierarchical caste relations existing in Kerala did not inhibit class formation there, but appear to have done so elsewhere in India (or at least are claimed to have done so (see Moore 1966). One 'structural' explanation holds that the close correspondence between caste and class in Kerala made the outcome of class politics almost inevitable once lower castes began self-organizing (see Jeffrey 1984), but comparative evidence does not reveal such a 'natural' link between lower caste and class movements even where they structurally coincided. Moreover, it can be argued that daily rituals of caste submission and subservience have prevented the growth of modern political consciousness, and bear a good part of the blame for the weakness of class consciousness in India.¹¹

The transformation of what one contemporary observer of early twentieth-century Kerala called a 'madhouse of caste', towards the predominance of class-based protest emerges as a distinct puzzle. Although for a long time the daily practices of segregation and servility prevented collective rebellion among lower castes, new forms of colonial governmentality such as census-based or caste categories encouraged modern associational forms among various castes across India, which in some instances took radical forms. In Kerala, these caste organizations initially discouraged the language and politics of class confrontation, but gradually became radicalized. Indeed, caste radicalization was a crucial precondition and precursor to communist ascendancy in Kerala.

Summary of the argument

The central part of the book's analysis is to show how the interaction between state legacies and the early phase of the winning of left 'hegemony' in Kerala converged to create its distinctive policy regime, and to evaluate both the achievements and limitations of this regime. I grant state legacies as well as political practices some autonomy, arguing, however, that without the left's political practices, the effects of state legacies upon future regimes would have been lost. This reconstruction puts a large explanatory burden on how left leaders used a variety of political tactics within shifting political circumstances, cobbling together a substantial extension to the prior welfare state once they won power. None of this would have been possible without carefully chosen strategies and tactics; but these did not simply appear from nowhere. They were historical products of prior patterns of caste struggle as well as state formation. This analysis thus points the way to a more nuanced and historically informed analysis of contemporary developmental dilemmas and the role of social movements in the era of globalization.

The argument of this book rests firmly upon the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony', defined as the moral-political authority to transform society. This hegemony is the product of political strategies and tactics employed by organizations; within a mass anti-colonial movement it involves seizing the opportunity to define the scope of the movement. My argument is that the hegemony of the communists in Kerala was made possible because they formed a left *faction* of the mainstream nationalist party, also known as the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), during the anti-colonial political struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, thus avoiding isolation as experienced by other communists across British India. They utilized existing repertoires of lower caste struggles, yet organized workers and tenants by effectively expanding their tactics to include land invasions, strikes and public protests. This had the effect of placing the CSP at the heart of the anti-colonial movement in Kerala, a feat not achieved anywhere else in India.

Central to this argument is the claim that these class- and caste-based challenges were integral to left party formation in Kerala, leaving a distinct 'movementist' or insurgent imprint on its identity. The communist party in Kerala was thus born through its insertion in a newly constructed 'civil society', rather than as a secret, underground cell as it was elsewhere in India. This factor was crucial to its later abilities to effect reforms in Kerala's social policies and social structure. Most importantly, the party's association with a range of popular movements and with tactical innovation and associations was key to its hegemonic project, as it made possible multi-class alliances that underpinned its electoral victories, and reduced the salience of caste associations in Kerala's civil society. In turn, this party formation legacy gave social movements a critical role in determining the future of the state's developmental choices.

In giving politics this kind of autonomy, my argument diverges from earlier Marxist and pluralist accounts of party formation and ascendancy (social base and cleavage arguments). Briefly, these theories view parties as reflections of underlying social relations that exist prior to the party. My theory not only places political organizations and practices prior to social relations (that is, views the former as instrumental to the latter (such as class formation)), but it additionally shows how structures exercise important effects in more indirect ways. Thus I will argue in Chapter 4 that the various class and caste configurations that existed in colonial Kerala encouraged, but did not determine, left party formation, and show through comparative evidence that similar social structures elsewhere did not produce the same political organizations.

In probing the specificity of left political strategies in Kerala, a crucial comparative question is obviously to ask why there has not been a comparable parliamentary challenge from left parties in other regions of India, except for the significant case of West Bengal, where communists have held power even longer and more consistently than in Kerala – for an unbroken six terms since the 1960s when they first came to power. They have also instituted far-reaching land tenure reforms, and maintained higher economic growth rates than in Kerala. Yet on

balance Bengal is *weaker* on measures of substantive democratic outcomes than Kerala, because – as this book shows – popular contention in the state was relatively weaker and the communist party was less embroiled in popular struggles than in Kerala.

Were these differences merely due to differences in the social base of the communists in the two states? In earlier scholarship on Kerala there was a consensus that 'structural' conditions (conceived mostly as property relations), which determine the combination of interest, incentive and opportunity for collective organization among subordinate groups, could explain much of its radical trajectory. That is, the overwhelming preponderance of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, as well as Kerala's high proletarianization rates in the mid-twentieth century, influenced a left turn in politics. Some scholars such as Herring (1983) and Kannan (1988), while emphasizing the structural preconditions of Kerala's development, gave a strong role in their analysis to the communists' strategies of political struggle in determining its policy complex.¹² Yet, these studies begged the crucial comparative question of why the communists in Kerala were successful while they were not elsewhere even where similar objective conditions prevailed. The table below shows the differences in political outcomes in cases that ostensibly shared rather similar structural conditions. It is beyond the scope of the book to discuss each outcome in detail, but a brief look at their trajectories in Chapter 2 (and a more in-depth look at Bengal) reveals some interesting differences which highlight the role of political strategy and tactics at crucial historical moments in effecting their ascendancy.

Political outcomes in four regions sharing structural characteristics

	<i>Late colonial</i>	<i>Post-independence</i>
Bihar	CSP ascendancy	Conservative Congress
Andhra	CSP/CPI ascendancy, insurgency	Congress/Telugu Desam
Kerala	CSP/CPI ascendancy, insurgency	CPM and Congress
West Bengal	CPI ascendancy, insurgency (weak)	CPM

The dilemmas of left parties in a democracy

A large section of this book is devoted to the practices of Kerala's communists within the nationalist movement, with a view to explaining how and why these practices mattered in subsequent decades. In this sense the question of democracy remains largely irrelevant until Chapter 5. But it looms large in this book because part of the puzzle is that Kerala's communists eventually achieved what they did within a competitive parliamentary democracy. As Kohli (2001) has argued, India's transition to democracy remains a neglected issue in scholarship.

Although he cites the puzzle of why India has remained democratic under difficult conditions, a large part of the puzzle is also to establish why substantive democracy still remains so weak in a thriving parliamentary democracy. One way of thinking about these two questions together is to ask whether the stability of India's democracy despite underlying difficult conditions is owed to the failure or stalling of substantive democracy, and conversely the counterfactual – whether substantive democracy in India might have been worse off without a firmly established parliamentary system. As the ferment of the formative years of the communist parties and the immediate decades following it attest, violence and instability were an integral part of subordinate class demands for substantive democracy. The Congress-dominated state in many instances had to suppress these demands and the radicalization of the communist parties for stability to prevail in the post-independence Indian democracy.

The question of whether parliamentary democracy forces radical left parties to capitulate and soften their goals has been debated for a long time. As a corpus of work on democracy has shown, the formal freedoms of democracy, such as parliamentary rule, suffrage, and civil rights, were themselves the product of political struggles in which subordinate classes often played a key role (Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer, *et al.* 1992; Therborn 1977). Yet, ironically, one may argue that these very freedoms have stalled the further expansion of substantive democracy, in part because they have congealed in the form of liberal democracy, a pluralistic form imbricated with unequal social structures, exploitation and 'unfreedom'. In producing consent to this form of representation, liberal democratic institutions suppress alternative possibilities of popular participation, as well as insurgent protest from the working classes and poorer, disempowered groups. Democratic institutions have thus presented socialists with a dilemma, for their close association with the reproduction of capitalism (as they have tended to understand it) has raised serious questions about the possibilities for any meaningful transformation of structures of inequality from within these institutions. Hence 'revolution' was viewed as the only meaningful form of social transformation, of bringing about social democracy. However, there were also splits among socialists about the promise and perils of the 'parliamentary path'.¹³ As Przeworski and Sprague (1986: 14) note: 'once established, the new political institutions had to be treated either as the enemy or a potential instrument'.¹⁴

The adoption of the parliamentary path by Kerala's communists and by the two major communist party formations in India, followed from a brief experiment with the insurrectionary tactic of guerrilla warfare in Andhra Pradesh, in particular, but also in the two other significant bases – Kerala and Bengal. The failures and near collapse of the party (CPI) gave the communists a bracing view of their position in Indian politics – their regional confinement and hence political weakness and the formidable military apparatus of the Indian state. This appears to have brought a large section of the communists to the necessity for 'gradualist' tactics of revolution. To date the communists have not relinquished the language of revolution; however, they have gradually approximated the social democratic parties of Europe in many ways, most importantly by participating in

parliamentary politics. It is difficult to know what their alternatives were; in part this book seeks to assess this very question. In Kerala, the parliamentary pathway made intuitive sense, for the communists had long been engaged in local governmental institutions such as the Malabar District Board, since at least the 1940s. They had come to excel in the use of liberal democratic institutions, using Kerala's social movements tradition to continually recreate political struggles to deepen the relevance of these democratic institutions. Indeed, in view of the evidence of such local initiatives, any account of Indian democracy that views it as a mere colonial installation is misleading.

One reason why formal democracy *may* (but does not necessarily) limit real reforms is because the social structures of capitalist societies limit what parties can achieve (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Left parties cannot push through long-run reforms that will benefit *only* the working class, theoretically their primary social base, simply because of the algebra of parliamentary elections. No single socialist party has ever won more than 50 per cent of the vote without 'diluting' its base and forging coalitions which make the working classes merely another constituency.¹⁵ In turn, as Przeworski and Sprague argue, this dilutes socialist political programmes towards populism. Socialist parties risk losing sight of their objective of inching closer to socialism through parliamentary elections and social policy, because the democratic 'rules of the game' necessarily defeat this purpose. This is a provocative claim that will find much resonance in the materials on Kerala and Bengal. In particular, I will argue that the formal rules of democratic electoral competition have skewed the insurgent possibilities as well as the policy priorities of the communists towards winning the next set of elections. This reinforces political conventionality rather than innovation and risk. In Bengal, more so than in Kerala, the formal, parliamentary arena was the primary terrain for party formation and attempts at hegemony in the post-independence era. In both cases, the parties have had to cater to the algebra of elections, leaving revolutionary practice to the side. However, while the challenges to substantial reform witnessed in both cases have confirmed Przeworski and Sprague's argument, it is not for the reasons specified by them. The dualistic rubric of 'reform vs. revolution' is not analytically very helpful. If the communists in Kerala and Bengal had not entered the electoral arena, perhaps they would have been rendered inconsequential; neither state would have seen comparable reductions in poverty under Congress governments even with the pressure of social movements from below.

Furthermore, at a purely demographic level, left parties in countries like India, Brazil, Mexico and South Korea do not face the dilemma posed by the numerical weakness of the working classes, since workers (defined even in the strictest Marxist terms) are still significant in these economies and a crucial base for left parties. At the same time, given that in most of these societies rural constituencies are powerful, an agrarian-industrial alliance is a crucial underpinning for any left hegemonic project. But drawing the pre-capitalist, and combined and uneven logic of agrarian relations into the bourgeois logic of elections poses its own specific problems for the left. Here, the issue of social 'heterogeneity' looms

large; the 'articulation' of capitalist and pre-capitalist relations, that is, the mutual imbrication of wage labour and bonded, unfree labour, as well as caste, ethnic and tribal relations that criss-cross with one another, produce a dizzying array of fissures that must be delicately negotiated. These render not only a 'semi-proletariat' with strong agrarian ties, but also forms of consciousness and action that cannot be understood through the lens of theories of working class action in advanced capitalist contexts. In India, the most common strategy adopted by parties is to utilize a modern concept of caste to create pan-regional solidarities across smaller sub-castes (*jatis*), and the minutiae of structural divisions which have made caste appeals salient in Indian political life.

Finally, and perhaps centrally as far as this book is concerned, it is important to note that the question of how much a left party can achieve through parliamentary participation is not merely an 'abstract' theoretical issue, however much it may have figured in grand political debates within Marxism.¹⁶ The answer depends on *what it has done to get there*, and what it is aiming at by participating in bourgeois politics. Hence the important link between historical practices and their effects on future pathways – a link that runs through the entire book.

The 'relative autonomy' of the political

In this book I treat parties as *congealed practices* rather than as institutions, networks or organizations in a formal sense. This does not mean that the other concepts and approaches are flawed; rather, this way of thinking about parties allows us to pay close attention to political practices and not merely the rationally constructed strategies and tactics that parties attempt to implement. In particular, I seek a better understanding of how political practices matter in the 'making and unmaking' of salient cleavages through which hegemonies are forged.¹⁷

The autonomy of parties from social cleavages has been increasingly recognized in political science and political sociology (Chhibber 1999; Keck 1992); yet it has also been recognized that parties bear some relationship to the dominant social cleavages in a society. In earlier liberal¹⁸ as well as Marxist political sociology,¹⁹ parties were viewed strictly as representations of social cleavages. This theory and its attendant methodology of producing typologies and correlations were, however, temporally static, leaving out the *process* by which 'the working class' or any other cleavage such as religion or ethnicity is formed, and its 'interests' articulated.

In eliciting the relatively independent effects of party practices on left party ascendancy and class formation in Kerala, this book treat parties as active agents in the *formation* of 'cleavages',²⁰ and suggests that to some extent they causally precede the political articulation and 'representation' of the latter. Thus it does not assume pre-given social boundaries, or assign interests to these groups or cleavages. However, neither does it suggest that parties form or come to represent cleavages at their will. Their political autonomy is 'relative' to the specific, underlying 'structural' relations in a given society (Przeworski 1985; Stepan-

Norris and Zeitlin 1989; Zeitlin 1984).²¹ The latter, moreover, provide the *very means* of generating and inhibiting the potential for movement/party growth.²²

The political practices by which parties come to gain authoritative and hegemonic representation of social cleavages that they in part help to form have two components which will be developed in the empirical analysis. The first issue is how a party strategizes *vis-à-vis* the state, that is, the manner in which its leaders and activists recognize existing 'political opportunity structures', and can seize upon them at critical historical moments.

The second issue concerns the strategy forged by parties in 'civil society', an increasingly deployed concept in theories of democratic practice. Rather than assume that civil society is inherently a sphere of solidarity and 'good' associationalism,²³ or that it is from this domain that democratic impulses inevitably originate, however, I argue that parties and the 'relatively autonomous' sphere of the political constitute a separate realm which plays a crucial role in 'forming' social cleavages and their demands out of the myriad conflicts situated in civil society. In particular, the concept of civil society is of interest for a concept of party hegemony, for a party wins hegemony in part through its strategy in civil society. It must both address itself to prior forms of activism and association in civil society, and galvanize new forms. The crucial link here is that left parties do not gain ascendancy and hegemony merely by representing class interests; they play an important role in defining the terrain of the political, and staking claims to issues that go beyond class, relating to other popular movements. Such parties are more deeply inserted in civil society, and when in power are made accountable to these existing organizations.

Party dominance vs. hegemony

It is crucial to distinguish between party hegemony and dominance, simply because of the way in which the two terms are often collapsed in the literature. For example, Pempel (1990) has argued that dominance is a sufficient condition for a party to push through its policy agenda. In turn, he defines dominance as follows:

A dominant party must at least gain an electoral plurality, which means dominance in socioeconomic mobilization. It must also enjoy or create a bargaining advantage vis-à-vis other political parties so it remains at the core of any coalitions that are formed. Then, it must remain in office long enough to implement its historical agenda. Finally, while in office it must be able to implement that historical programme and use the instruments of the state so as to isolate its opposition and strengthen its own electoral position. Dominance thus involves an interrelated set of mutually reinforcing processes that have the potential to beget even more dominance.

(Pempel 1990: 16)

Quite simply, using the concept of party hegemony or hegemonic capacity to describe Kerala's social policies is misleading if we use the term to mean 'dominance'. In this case there is a noticeable lack of 'hegemony' as defined by Pempel because the communists have not remained in power for long enough to 'implement their historical agenda', holding office for almost an equal number of terms as their opposition, and have been unable to use the state to isolate their competitors (the Congress Party). On the other hand, they have been able to remain at the core of coalitions, implement a historical programme, and dominate the mobilization of workers, peasants and sections of the middle classes. This was particularly true of their tenure until the 1980s, after which the communists began to encounter the limits of a class confrontational strategy, and a weakening economy, thereafter switching to new modes of organizing. These observations complicate the 'dominance thesis' proposed by Pempel because the primary criterion for dominance largely appears to be electoral success. However, this can include all parties that dominate politics merely by virtue of the absence of a viable opposition, or popular social movement activity that challenges their dominance. In this regard, Bengal's CPM appears to fit the conditions for dominance far more than Kerala's. The absence of a viable opposition to the Bengal CPM means that it faces fewer challenges to its dominance than does the Kerala CPM. Of course, we can also argue that this is because it is doing a better job than Kerala's CPM, but the evidence does not suggest that.

The stalling of formal democracy to competition between two or at most three parties creates confusion over what one-party dominance actually signifies. Is it hegemony in the sense of consensual democracy at work, or is it a lack of alternatives? 'One-party dominance', examples of which include the SAP in Sweden, the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan and, within India, the CPM in Bengal (Pempel 1990), poses distinct problems for democratic theory and practice, for it makes such a party less prone to challenge, adaptation and accountability. Parties that have consistently managed to win elections over a period of several decades are presumably in a better position to implement strong public policy agendas, but one-party dominance often creates a slower reform tendency when not challenged by other parties (see Echeverri-Gent 1992 on sluggish reforms in Bengal and evidence provided in Chapter 5).

A second problem with collapsing dominance and hegemony is that it reduces consent to the act of voting, which flattens the notion of politics, conflating democracy with infrequent and routinized procedures. Instead, it is important to recognize that while electoral success in a liberal democracy provides an important measure of a party's relevance in the political arena, as well as the opportunity to let dominance beget more dominance, electoral successes do not necessarily reflect a party's capacity or willingness to create reforms, particularly structural reforms that reshape existing class structures and patterns of domination.²⁴ But in what factors does such 'capacity' lie, and what is its relationship to hegemony?

Gramsci's original use of the term hegemony (of the proletariat) contained some idea of 'consent' or popular acquiescence, that is, an ideological-political

leadership exercised by the party among its followers.²⁵ The hegemonic project of a party would, as Jessop (1990) argues, be concerned *with more than* accumulation strategies, an area that most analyses of parties and social policies focus their attention on (except for the state autonomy theorists who examine the visions, goals and interests of state officials and bureaucrats) (emphasis mine). However, including the contested sphere of civil society in a theory of democracy suggests an attention to how parties must also authoritatively define and/or put into effect social reforms, political stability and 'moral regeneration' (ibid.) Hegemonic projects are thus oriented towards – to borrow a term from Gramsci – the 'national-popular', not just class relations (which is mere economism). In attempting to understand the degree of Kerala's left's ability to push through crucial anti-poverty reforms, the role of communists in capturing the nationalist anti-colonial movement, their subsequent involvement in the movement of linguistic regional unification of Kerala (Aikya Kerala), and other such projects that eventually drew a powerful set of lower caste and class movements into politics, would be a crucial part of the explanation of their ability to redefine the state's priorities for several decades in the direction of critical anti-poverty reforms and measures, *despite* or perhaps *because* of not having continual tenure in government. It is important, however, that we do not lose sight of the importance of accumulation as the bottom-line condition for hegemony. Economic crisis, joblessness, declining profits and wages make left parties particularly vulnerable in the electoral arena. What this book emphasizes is that hegemony runs deeper than accumulation, because it is a quality of a regime whose goal is reform and redistribution of profits even while ensuring the conditions that make them possible.

We can present the broader argument schematically: the strength of subordinate class mobilization and associationalism combined with a strong left presence, both parliamentary as well as extra-parliamentary, produces the strongest institutionalization of anti-poverty reforms (Kerala). This theory concurs with several key works in political sociology which hold that the strength of workers' insurgency and unions is positively related to the institutionalization of social democratic policies (see Korpi 1980; Piven and Cloward 1977).

Predicting anti-poverty reforms

<i>Subordinate class associational strength</i>	<i>Weak</i>	<i>Strong</i>
Left party parliamentary strength		
Weak	Weak reforms (Uttar Pradesh)	Weak reforms (Bihar)
Strong	Moderate reforms (Bengal)	Strong reforms (Kerala)

State autonomy and legacies

Legacies of state action are a crucial part of the story of Kerala's successes, and in closely examining this aspect of historical continuity and discontinuity, this book raises some important comparative issues for the study of welfare and the post-colonial state. As discussed earlier, much of the literature on Kerala, with few exceptions (see Sen 1991), is strikingly silent on the issue of the existence of a strong welfare state legacy in the nineteenth century, and its consequences for Kerala's subsequent social developments. 'State autonomy' theorists such as Skocpol (1985) and Weir and Skocpol (1985) have argued that policy legacies carry over into welfare states in Europe for long periods of time; this argument can equally be applied to the case of Kerala. One could argue that Kerala's developmental patterns were determined as far back as the mid- to late nineteenth century through major reforms bequeathed by its princely rulers.²⁶ Even if this is so, the important question is to trace exactly what effects these legacies had on the rise of subsequent policy regimes.

That this question has created much confusion in the literature on Kerala can be seen in an exchange between three well-known commentators on Kerala in the *New York Review of Books*.²⁷ Responding to Amartya Sen's emphasis on nineteenth-century princely state initiatives in education in the southern principality of Travancore, anthropologists Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin argued that Sen's neglect of the radical traditions of the state were 'misleading'. As they argued, '[t]hrough he does credit recent "left wing governments", he gives far too much weight to Kerala's pre-independence rulers' stress on public education, and to a tradition of inheritance through the female line' (1991: 72). Certainly, it could thus be, as Sen argues, that reforms in land tenure, state involvement in public health, education and caste reforms in the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin suggest Kerala's lead in social development preceded the entry of the communists, and raises the question of how much historical weight to place upon the left tenure in power. Moreover, does not the somewhat weaker development of social policies in Bengal in fact reinforce the argument that left rule is of lesser consequence than other factors such as colonial legacies and social structure in determining policy regimes in a post-colonial society?

This is an interesting question, one which has received some attention. For example, Hansen and Stepputat (2002: 28) argue that new political regimes have to produce a coherent 'state project' in the aftermath of decolonization so as to carry out crucial reforms. In other words, political forces must undertake institutional reforms and 'reinvent' the state. Sudipto Kaviraj (1997: 56) argues that the Congress government in newly independent India ushered in a 'period of fast and crucial historical change' between 1946 and 1950 belying the 'myth of exaggerated continuity' between the late colonial and early independence era. This is a curious view, given that the Indian state was not founded in 1947, even if the new regime undertook major institutional reforms. A careful analysis must probe both the continuities and ruptures in politics that independence and

Congress governance enabled. In practice, thoroughgoing reinventions of the state are rarely carried out even by parties professing such revolutionary objectives. In India, moreover, the Congress Party had been a part, however unwilling, of the colonial state since at least the 1935 Government of India Act, making it simultaneously insurgent movement and ruling party in a number of provinces.

This book will argue, particularly in Chapter 3, that where state welfare legacies were in existence during the colonial era, for example in the princely state of Baroda in western India, there was no *necessary* translation into a welfarist state in the post-independence era. There are complicated reasons for this that include the size and influence of the prior state, and the redrawing of state boundaries in the 1960s. However, undoubtedly intervening political changes would affect whether welfare legacies were upheld, extended or forgotten. This book thus also traces the importance of an accompanying legacy to state formation in Kerala, that of caste reform movements which intersected with state penetration of society to enhance state capacity building. This legacy was perhaps more important for the future political trajectory of Kerala than the state legacy itself, and explains why the reformist aspects of state action were kept alive by a host of social movements in modern Kerala.

Method of enquiry

This book attempts to break away from the standard narrative of communist ascendancy in Kerala.²⁸ Instead, its goals are primarily analytical, touching upon questions that are fundamentally comparative in nature. In addressing the specificities of a 'case', that is, in attempting historical specificity as well as generalization, the method employed here deviates from most standard social science models. The predominant model for social analysis is what Abbott (2001) calls 'general linear reality', which assumes that the units of analysis are fixed, and can be grasped as variables.²⁹ Single case-based analyses are often anathema to comparativists, for they are seen as merely inductive and thus non-falsifiable (King *et al.* 1994; Kiser and Hechter 1991). When cases are used, they often do the work of narratives, using variables as subjects (Abbott 2001: 135). Yet, 'general' theories, that is, theories that are not specific to cases and in effect cut across their idiosyncrasies, are probabilistic statements. They can suggest the sets of variables *most likely* to yield a particular outcome. But to establish *causation*, or put differently, to specify the time-space conditions under which connections between variables are true, we must test these theories in specific cases. Without attention to causation socio-historical analysis loses its *raison d'être*, and collapses into mere narrative and historicism.

The aim of this book's enquiry is to develop a historically specific theory that is time-sensitive yet inherently theory-driven, comparative and generalizable (for other such studies, see Kimeldorf 1988 and Seidman 1994; see also Paige 1999). Temporally and spatially specified concepts are necessary for explanations of

specific outcomes in specific cases, and involve an event-centred rather than a variable-based approach to historical explanation (Aminzade 1992; Sewell 1996). Historical sociologists have always recognized that social reality happens 'in sequences of actions located within constraining or enabling structures', and increasingly, greater methodological attention is being directed to analyzing historical processes (Abbott 1992: 428).

The search for causality within a narrative is one among several methods of searching history to understand the present. This search involves, as Weber argued, a series of abstractions which attempt to locate the cultural significance of an event, often involving a 'decision' between two possibilities – one that was actualized, the other suppressed (Weber 1949: 171; see also Haydu 1998). Weber argued that counterfactuals are the best way to analyse the course of history. He emphasized that although they involve an 'imaginative re-enactment' of history, each counterfactual must be based upon 'objective possibilities', that is, a consideration of what was actually possible. This is not to call for the equivalent of 'historical econometrics'. Following Burawoy (1990), one may argue that both counterfactuals and comparisons conceived as if 'standing outside of history' or by 'freezing history' are simply positivistic. Yet looking at history only 'as it happened' is in fact open to the dangers of historicism and determinism, and recognizing that what happened was also simultaneously the erosion of other alternative possibilities involves a real engagement with history. For Weber, in fact only a deterministic 'science' could refuse to conceive of other possibilities, for in such positivistic and empiricist knowledge there are no abstractions, only 'facts'.

How do we pose counterfactuals while staying faithful to historical specificity? One approach is clearly through historical investigation itself, which can reveal trajectories taking a different path at particular turning points. Such an analysis is fruitfully employed in Zeitlin's *Civil Wars in Chile* (1934), or in Griffin's (1993) analysis of a lynching event in the rural south. Alternatively, counterfactual questions can be answered by the use of comparative evidence – for instance, we can look at those cases where a certain event did not occur despite comparable initial, generating conditions. These intertwined methods of analysis yield a generalizable theory through detailed, historical and substantive analysis the main point of which would be lost without the aid of these tools of analysis. This mode of analysis, combining a range of primary sources with extensive historical monographs, has a long and productive lineage in historical sociology.

In specifying Kerala's distinct trajectory through comparisons and counterfactuals, this book draws on research in several other cases within India – the princely states of Mysore, Hyderabad and Baroda in the colonial era, and the post-independence states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal being the most significant ones. The Indian nation-state (and the loose amalgam that existed during the colonial era) is an ideal ground for comparative analysis, for holding constant certain factors such as its position in the sphere of

international relations, geography, ecology, religion and early political formations. This provides a range of variations in key social, political and economic preconditions and outcomes. These cases are important because they highlight other possible pathways for Kerala – sharing some of the same conditions, yet ending up with different outcomes. These cursory comparisons cannot take the place of the fine-grained analysis of single cases, but they can help to avoid just-so stories that do not explain why something happened. However, Bengal is chosen for more in-depth analysis because it highlights distinctions concerning the roles of left parties (in this case the same left party). It is a crucial case because it shows that a left party with a significant social base can make some changes when in power, but is highly limited unless it maintains a strong connection to its insurgent and movementist character. In a formal, parliamentary democracy, movements and parties are limited by the existence of political competition as well as the overall policy emphasis of global political-economic imperatives. Yet change is possible, indeed significant change, if there is a dynamic, synergistic relationship between parties and movements. Indeed, this book suggests that one without the other – movement without party or party without movement – is unlikely to shift political power in ways that substantially reduce poverty or achieve comprehensive development.