

**KERALA MODEL REVISITED:
NEW PROBLEMS, FRESH CHALLENGES**

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Working Paper No. 15

October 2006

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Abstract

The percentage share of those under the poverty line in Kerala has declined due to faster economic growth. Does it mean that if the same policies are followed, eventually those considered desperately poor as a section will cease to exist in Kerala Society? It is difficult to happen. Three reasons are pointed out by this study in support of such a conclusion. **1)** The social and cultural cleavage between the desperately poor and those above them, more than economic differences, are on the increase. Those immediately above the desperately poor can afford to purchase services from sources other than public institutions and services. To the poor, the only way out is to get such services from the public channels. Since they are turned to be the only beneficiaries of public institutions and services, they only will demand the upkeep and maintenance of efficiency of such institutions. Since they will not be able to exert as much pressure as other social groups in public decision making their interests will not get much attention. **2)** In democratic decision making, the most important are the political parties. The poor whose interests get systematically neglected will not be able to make themselves heard in the forums of political parties. This possibility is higher in Kerala where the polity is trapped into a two party or two front system. To set a polarization started in favour of the desperately poor within such a closed polity is difficult. **3)** Though there have been some organizations and organized moves from among the poor themselves, they have yet to prove to be able to surmount the obstacles that their predecessors had to face and failed to surmount completely. Therefore, however welcome the recent economic growth is, through it alone Kerala's comprehensive development is difficult to be realized.

Key Words: Kerala Model, Development, Economic Growth, New Problems.

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It was in 1975 that the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, under the academic leadership of Professor K.N.Raj, brought out a volume for the United Nations Committee for Development Planning, titled *Poverty: Unemployment and Development Policy: A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala* (UN/CDS 1975 now onwards). This volume did not coin the term Kerala Model of Development. Nevertheless many other studies which followed the analysis given by this volume, used the term and made it imprinted in academic usage. What this volume did was to project the state of Kerala as a case which will support the basic needs and special targeting of development.

Not only did UN/CDS 1975 bring to academic and policy makers' attention, the different type of development experience that Kerala had undergone, it also brought up possibilities for looking at developmental process altogether differently. Scholars have raised doubts about the use of the term Model to describe Kerala's different experience of development [PARAYIL 2000, 1-15]. Since we have precedents of analytically and empirically conceptualising a different regional development experience, such as the Swedish or Scandinavian Model [CHILDS 1980; PONTUSSON 1992], the use of the term Kerala Model, already well-entrenched in literature; cannot be faulted. It was pointed out that Kerala's experience has proven wrong the general principle that improvement in the standard of living of common people can be realized only after the achievement of high economic growth [ISSAC and THARAKAN 1995]. The fact that Kerala has done well in terms of quality of life and human development indicators in comparison with other States of India and most of the developing world and that in Kerala, basic facilities and welfare measures are fairly evenly distributed across gender and rural-urban divide and among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as others, need not be restated [THARAKAN 1998].

Even when the arguments in favour of the pattern of development followed in Kerala were strong, there were some disturbing questions raised with regard to its sustainability and replicability. These questions arose mainly in relation to the slow economic growth of the region. It was not only slow in general but the growth of the commodity-producing sector was particularly low. The low growth in the economy reflected in high levels of unemployment. With a high residue of unemployment of educated human power, the capital investment required for giving them employment was found to be high. Besides, some national schemes for unemployment reduction did not suit the peculiarity of Kerala's unemployment problem. In addition, the growing fiscal crisis faced by the region from mid-1980s, added to these problems [GEORGE 1998, 1999]. The capacity of the state and civil society organisations to invest in the social sector depends, in the long run, on the rate of economic growth. A welfare state cannot be maintained for long by large-scale borrowing, because the expectations of people for welfare services also will become increasingly costly [GEORGE and THARAKAN 2005]. At the international level, nations with less welfare obligations get a competitive advantage leading to the exodus of capital to the low wage, low welfare regions. Kerala has to face a similar competition not only from other countries of the world, but also from other low wage, low welfare states in India.

The sustainability of the Kerala Model has been questioned from the environmental perspective too [CHATTOPADHYA 2001]. With a comparatively low per capita income, till very recently, the per capita

consumption in the state has been very high. This has to be seen in the context of the increasing role played by migration to, and remittances from outside the state and India; in sustaining the development pattern in Kerala to the present [ZACHARIAH et al. 2003; ZACHARIAH and RAJAN 2004] though there is hardly any evidence to suggest that migration and remittances had any role in initiating the Kerala Model. The high consumption that is found in Kerala is made possible by externalising environmentally unsound production [VERON 2000]. Such higher consumption leads to larger generation of waste and also larger utilization of non-renewable natural resources like forests, clay, river sand, water etc.

Lately, evidences are forthcoming to suggest that Kerala has got out of the low-growth syndrome. This had its positive implications for reduction of poverty too. By 1999-2000, the incidence of poverty in the State was just over 10 per cent [ECONOMIC SURVEY 2005]. One close observer of the Kerala scene [KANNAN 2005] has suggested analysing the turnaround in growth that may well be the beginning of a virtuous cycle of growth based on human development. The current excitement is generated by recent empirical evidences which show greater “economic growth seemingly helped by early achievements on the human development front” [CHAKRABORTHY 2005, 541]. Irrespective of some important problems like persisting female disadvantage in social and economic roles, and the issue of social security including reprioritisation of health care facilities for the increasing population of the aged; a new development ‘narrative’ is suggested for Kerala [Ibid]. Several advantageous factors for future development, such as a demographic transition leading to very low rate of population growth, an educated labour force, a structural transformation of the economy which has led to two-thirds employment being generated outside agriculture and a labour migration which has familiarised people from Kerala with modern forms of organisation and management of work, are brought to attention [KANNAN 2005].

Some important issues are raised even within the context of the positive experience of economic growth in this region. Some of them interrogate the nature of growth itself. One of them is that the growth that is taking place is in the ‘non-tradable’ services, which are influenced by local demand. On the other hand, the growth has not adequately been felt in the commodity producing sectors or in those segments of high ‘value adding’ or export-oriented services sectors which depend upon comparative advantage vis-à-vis other states and regions. The growth has not been accompanied by appreciable employment generation; which is important in the context of considerable accumulated unemployment. The employment elasticity of growth in Kerala between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 was estimated to be just 0.013 which was found to be the lowest among 15 major States in India [GEORGE and THARAKAN 2005]. In the past, Kerala economy had developed strong linkages with international markets [THARAKAN 1999]. The large-scale emigration of people from Kerala had strengthened these linkages. This migration provided opportunities for being exposed to modern technology and management skills practised elsewhere. But it is found to be not leading, in any significant extent, to transfer of such technology and management skills to the domestic economy at the local level [GEORGE and THARAKAN 2005].

Other questions have been raised about the apparent inadequacy of the development pattern to solve some of the major problems faced by Kerala society. The persisting female disadvantage in social and economic realms has been further underlined by a recent study [KODOTH and EAPEN 2005] which, looking beyond the state level

gender development index in which Kerala is generally acknowledged to be ahead of other states, has brought out several aspects of Kerala society which questions gender performance in various dimensions of well-being. While tracing the plight of subaltern classes in general, another study has gone to the extent of stating that the “systematic marginalisation of the subaltern sections has been blot on the Kerala Model” [KUNHAMAN 2002, 100]. That there is a particular concentration of SC and ST population among the poor in Kerala and that poverty reflected in terms of consumption, asset holding and housing is high among them, has been brought out by D. Narayana [2003]. Apart from the SCs and STs, who have not been able to benefit from the Kerala Model to any great extent, there is also the case of the marine fishing community; who have been described as ‘outliers’ to the ‘central tendency’ of Kerala’s pattern of development [KURIEN 2000].

The preceding review of literature on the subject indicates that the Kerala Model is not without its problems. It is too early to say anything definite about whether the spurt in economic growth alone will solve these problems. One of the important problems faced by Kerala is the persistent exclusion of the marginalised – including women – from partaking the benefits of development. In this context, it is important to find out whether their exclusion was inherent to the development process itself. If it is, then extending the same development strategy further; with necessary amendments and with higher growth rate, will only strengthen the problem of exclusion further.

In an earlier survey, it was found that it was mainly through struggles based upon the growing consciousness of rights among the relatively underprivileged groups, that the access to basic services was made possible to wide sections of the Kerala population [THARAKAN 1998]. This process was facilitated initially by Socio-Religious Reform Movements (SRRMs) [THARAKAN 1992] and later by political movements [SATHYAMURTHY 1985]. It were Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen [1995], who very emphatically pointed out the positive role that political activism and public demand played in the developmental process of Kerala. The fact that in Kerala, widespread social opportunities in many crucial fields are guaranteed, was attributed by them to “radical commitments of left leaning governments and (to) activist general politics”. They [1993] also pointed out that Kerala having achieved such success through careful and wide coverage of public support, shows how much can be achieved even at low level of income, if public action is aimed at promoting people’s basic entitlement and capabilities. Though such a process was very much operative in Kerala society, what we have found from other studies is that sections like Marine Fisherfolk, *Dalits* and *Adivasis* were relatively left out of its coverage.

Though Kerala has reduced the percentage share of poor among its population, the inequalities within the society or cleavage among social classes seem to be increasing. They need not be exclusively economical. New dimensions of poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion are appearing. [See KUNHAMAN 2002, 100-3; BASKER 2002, 42-8]. The vital question in this regard is how can the preferences of the poor and other excluded sections of society influence policy making in their favour. The earlier pattern of development led to the strengthening of middle and lower middle level castes, communities and classes through organisation/unionisation and politicization of each of these specific groups [THARAKAN 1998]. Once they were able to make substantial gains from the developmental process, they demanded ‘representation’ in various decision-making bodies. As a result, the representation of various middle and lower middle groups increased in public decision making bodies, thus leading to obstruction of real ‘participation’ by other sections, particularly

the poor and marginalized. What seems to have happened is that the strengthened middle level castes, communities and classes and their interests particularly monopolised decision making in SRRMS, political movements, trade unions, so called civil society organisations and public bodies. This is not to deny that the poor and the marginalised never got organised or expressed their demands. There are a number of illustrious cases of them being organized. Under the leadership of Sree Ayyankali (1863-1941) as early as 1907 an organization of 'poor people', *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham* (SJPS) was organised. It aimed the basic demands of the whole marginalised sections quite successfully for a while [CHENTHARASSERRY (Ed.) 1991; GEORGE 1990]. Similarly another organisation called *Prathyaksha Reksha Deiva Sabha* (PRDS) was founded in 1910 under the initiative of Poykayil Yohannan who later on was called Kumara Guru Devan (1879-1939). He theorized on the basis of the common background of slavery of all oppressed groups and demanded a social identity based upon that [SANALMOHAN 1994]. Both Sree Ayyankali and Kumara Guru Devan were nominated to the *Sree Moolam Praja Sabha* or Popular Assembly with limited legislative functions in the Princely State of Thiruvithamkoor. Therefore, they had added opportunities to raise their demands. Nevertheless their success relative to other 'community leaders' were limited and the organizations they gave shape to deviated substantially from their original objectives later.

Kerala has a fairly long history of public action and democratization of competitive politics, basic freedom and well-run institutions of redress. Democracy ensures mechanisms of participation, consultation and bargaining, enabling policy makers to shape the consensus needed to undertake the necessary policy adjustments. In the resultant policies, competing interest groups vie with each other in determining public policy; which come out at different levels of compromises [TORNQUIST and THARAKAN 1996]. With a comparatively long history of democratic politics, different types of organized groups have emerged, giving public expression to the interests of their immediate constituencies. The consensus and compromises that these groups arrived at, apparently resulted in diversion of higher amount of scarce resources into quantitative expansion of social development oriented welfare expenses, like education but often with little thought for necessary diversification, quality development or even broader objectives of social justice. With the access to labour markets outside the domestic economy, the pressure for investment into such expansion persisted because it would suit immediate interests of the middle and lower middle class to make use of such opportunities.

A similar fate is reflected even in the case of much commended land reforms which was implemented from 1970 [RAJ and THARAKAN 1983]. The landless agricultural labourers were also mobilized around the demand for land reforms. When the SRRMs of the castes considered lowest in the social hierarchy deviated from their original purposes, it was through the movement for land reforms and trade unionism among agrarian proletariat that the political movements pushed further for their demands [JOSE 1977]. One of the main measures envisaged under the reforms was for granting three to ten cents of land to the landless to have their homesteads. The other important measures were abolition of tenancy and imposition of land ceilings. The distribution of homesteads was implemented well. The gain made out of the homesteads, increased the labourers' collective bargaining power, which in turn led to obtaining high real wages. If the landless labourers ended up with such limited but significant gains, the tenants stood to gain much more, as they became actual land proprietors. It has been argued that the preoccupation of Kerala land reforms with abolition of tenancy – a legal form of land holding – which covered even bigger holdings, led to a built in bias towards middle and larger

landholders [HERRING 1990], who largely came from the middle level of the social hierarchy. Not only did the former tenants receive land, they also acquired additional manoeuvring capacity with which they could hinder the other important measures of imposition of ceiling and redistribution of excess land. Further amendments to the land reform law were attempted; whereby significant portion of potential surplus land could have disappeared [THARAKAN 1982]. Though this particular amendment was later withdrawn, the fact that it could be attempted tend to show the influence that former tenants – who are likely to lose land through ceilings – have acquired over the system of public decision making.

Since the macro policy framework was an outcome of democratic polity and since most of the organized groups engaged in such decision making found it still conducive to the interests of their immediate constituencies, they continued to support the existing policy framework. Following the abatement of the initial mobilization of the people around land reforms, there was a lull in any new forward-looking programmes. It was at this juncture, the important political parties, got fragmented into several groups. They eventually regrouped and stabilized in two almost equally powerful alliances. Each of these alliances, with regard to any important issues, took positions diametrically opposite to those taken by the rival alliance. Ever since that, manoeuvrability for bipartisan policy making and implementation got considerably reduced. In other words, it is a deadlocked polity that sets the general framework for development of Kerala. As it has been said elsewhere, “in a nation of unevenly developed people of different ethnic, caste, religious and regional identities and of glaring economic inequalities. . . democratic political system and government represent a coalition of conflicting interests” [GURUKKAL 2001]. This coalition of conflicting interests tends to get stabilized within two or three united fronts that are operating in Kerala politics. In this context, the state has been dragged to a low level equilibrium, to achieve some short-term gains for the immediate constituencies of organized groups involved in decision making, or are well entrenched in clientelist politics. Into this low level equilibrium or the dead-locked polity, other pluralistic opinions emanating from the poor and excluded groups can rarely enter. On the other hand, political parties by themselves will not be able to enact changes leading to quality improvement, diversification, or introduction of new technologies unless their clients demand it. Even if the largely middle class clients of present day public decision makers are made to demand such changes, due to pressures from global economy or something similar, it is difficult to expect that they will integrate the demands of the underprivileged. A popular column [GOPALAKRISHNAN 2005] has recently expressed this problem quite powerfully. Writing about the author’s alma mater, a local school which is celebrating its platinum jubilee, he points out that it epitomised all that was good in Kerala’s public education system. His main point is that his school in his years had pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds. Now such diversity is not found. The author feels that the present middle class do not like to have their children study along with poor students. The growing middle class in Kerala are increasingly opting out of public sector institutions and are patronising private institutions run on commercial lines. In other words, large sections of the people of Kerala are gradually losing their stakes in the whole system [GEORGE and THARAKAN 2005].

Without the physical proximity of and social interaction with the underprivileged, which were provided by public institutions like government and government aided schools, can the middle class in Kerala ever again hope to vocalize genuine aspirations of the less privileged? Can they be effective participants of public action? It is doubtful. If the middle class is not a likely help, let us look at the situation of the underprivileged

themselves. In the case of land reforms, we have found how little the landless labourers who were considered 'stakeholders' had gained. The more severe plight that the marine fisherfolk were forced into, with an entirely different set of demands for land can be imagined. Since they were not involved in cultivation, their demand for land did not fit in with the demands typically found in mainstream agricultural areas. The land reforms which catered to problems from mainstream agricultural areas did not even consider the fisherfolk's peculiar demands. The *Adivasis* suffered from widespread alienation of land largely by migrants from the plains who could in turn make gains as being recognized as tenants under the tenancy abolition provision. The initial asset position of SC and ST population was quite limited, compared to others. In such circumstances, their ability to transform the opportunities inherent in whatever small benefits that they received also was limited.

From such position of weakness, two movements from the excluded groups themselves have emerged in recent times. There was a movement for *Adivasi* Rights led by *Gothra Maha Sabha* and a Fisher People's Movement in which a trade union called *Swatantra Matsya Thozhilali Union* played a major role. It is too early to make an assessment of the former. But, it seems to be facing certain significant problems. The latter, of which some studies have already come out [DIETRICH and NAYAK 2002, AERTHAYIL 2000], is also not out of problems. There are indications of growing lack of cohesion, disunity, and attempts being made of hijacking even the slogans of these movements by external forces. These groups have not been able to make comparable strides as others in the case of literacy [THARAKAN 1984; 1986; 1990; 2004]. Therefore, their ability to convert gains made in literacy into economic opportunities like other groups, also was limited. When we search for reasons as to why they were not able to make substantial gains in literacy and basic education, we come across observations like students from the fishing community have to face problems such as lack of funds to buy books and clothes and poor facilities for study at home, including lack of parental attention [KURIEN 2000]. These are exactly the same problems that Sree Ayyankali highlighted in the *Sree Moolam Praja Sabha* with regard to the education of *Pulaya* children, in early twentieth century [GIRIJALMAJAN 1991]. Similarly, the problems faced by the *Adivasi* Movement and the Fisher People's Movement have strong similarities with those faced by Sree Ayyankali's and Kumara Guru Devan's movements; like internal disunity and hijacking of their slogans by external forces.

The socio-political movement led by the Communist Party in Kerala had two major slogans under which popular mobilization was successfully realised, one for United Kerala and the other for comprehensive land reforms. Both these slogans had their appeal beyond class, caste and community feelings. Some observers took this as reason enough to argue that the Communist Party in Kerala emerged out of something akin to a social movement [DESAI 2003]. Decentralization of administration was thought of in the context of land reforms itself [ISSAC and FRANKE 2000]. But, it was implemented as the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) only in 1996. By that time, many people had already turned cynical towards it. Many of its provisions have been favourably commented upon [FRANKE and CHASIN 2000; KUNHAMAN 2002]. Nevertheless, it was found not to be as mobilizing a programme as the land reforms or unification of Kerala. It also seems to have not been completely successful in realizing the widely held expectation that further developmental initiatives will be driven by social movements and civil society organizations in the wake of the Campaign [THARAKAN 2004a]. It also failed to fully integrate previously marginalized sections and their demands.

Such a problem seems to affect organizations, which are supposed to be civil society formations as well. Kerala is widely believed to have one of the strongest civil societies in the developing world. But, that civil society is now apparently fragmented, which is reflected in watertight boundaries that separate different arenas and associations which otherwise should have been part of a common public sphere. The origins of this civil society go back to certain popular demands that emerged in the nineteenth century. They included demands for equality in religious and social spheres and for rightful access to public employment, education and health care facilities. Together with such organisations, activities of political parties, trade unions and cooperatives helped to evolve components of modern citizenship such as civic responsibility, social trust, egalitarianism and a world oriented individualism. All these components seem to be on the decline now, and there is increasing communalization, erosion of secular spaces, visibly strident religiosity and increasing violence upon women and other under privileged [BHASKER 2002].

One apparent reason for such developments seems to be that the socio-religious reform movements which served to spear-head initial reforms in Kerala society, found themselves in competition with political parties, trade unions, co-operatives, etc. for decisive positions in the public sphere. In such a competitive process, leading sections of each of such organisations struck various compromises with each other. Out of these compromises, different aspects of the public policy making apparatus came out as deadlocked as the polity of Kerala. Into their twin sphere of influence, no type of plurality that is reflected in public opinion of the people of Kerala can effectively enter. In spite of regular change of political regimes brought about by popular vote, they act very differently from what the populace seems to desire. “Citizenship in Kerala” as Rajan Gurukkal [2001] has put it has “turned to spectatorship”.

In addition to the polity, the civil society is also enmeshed in a low level equilibrium in Kerala. Civil society organisations or organisations which should be considered civil society organisations are also subject to the polarising effect of a fractured polity. They are also swept into groups, vying for power or indirect power by joining one dominant formation or other. What it implies is that the same socio-political process which led Kerala to achieve all those widely acclaimed welfare measures, can be inhibiting such measures to reach groups which were so far denied them. K.N.Raj and his colleagues found a good thing going on in Kerala in 1975 and reported it. Later studies raised different questions with regard to its sustainability and also related to the regions slow economic growth. The problems of sustainability still remain. Meanwhile the low economic growth has been replaced by high growth. The nature of growth and its inability to solve some important problems like that of gender has been raised. Apart from these, the way in which Kerala has developed so far has led to a sort of polarisation between classes/castes. The rising cleavages make further public action – seen as pivotal to the Kerala Model – difficult. Kerala managed to achieve high social indicators of development distributed over wide sections of the population, without a social revolution, because its society could give rise to powerful organisations from even underprivileged groups. They were supported by socially oriented political movements and SRRMs who could share some objectives with the political movements. Now, all three seem to be on the decline, leaving the excluded groups – however small they may be – without institutions and organisations to mediate their causes. In such circumstances, the title of B.P.R. Bhaskar’s Collection of Essays [2002], “Keralam running backwards” seems not only ominous but also plausible.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Conference on “Planning and Development: Institutions and Markets” organised in honour of Professor K.N. Raj held at St.Thomas College, Thrissur (October 2-3, 2004). I am grateful to Dr. A.A.Baby, Professor S.M.Krishna and Professor A.Vaidyanathan for helpful comments. I am also grateful to Professor K.K.George.

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