

# A VIRUS, SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, AND DIVIDENDS FOR KERALA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The global [coronavirus](#) pandemic is a natural, albeit brutal experiment. Just about every part of the world has been impacted and the range of responses we are seeing at the national and subnational levels reveal not only existing inequalities but also the political and institutional capacity of governments to respond. Nowhere is this more so true than in India. The national government ordered a lockdown but it is States that are actually implementing measures, both in containing the spread and addressing the welfare consequences of the lockdown. A number of States have been especially proactive, none more so than Kerala.

Though Kerala was the first State with a recorded case of coronavirus and once led the country in active cases, it now ranks 10th of all States and the total number of active cases (in a State that has done the most aggressive testing in India) has been declining for over a week and is now below the number of recovered cases. Given Kerala's population density, deep connections to the global economy and the high international mobility of its citizens, it was primed to be a hotspot. Yet not only has the State flattened the curve but it also rolled out a comprehensive 20,000 crore economic package before the Centre even declared the lockdown. Why does Kerala stand out in India and internationally?

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Kerala's much heralded success in social development has invited endless theories of its cultural, historical or geographical exceptionalism. But taming a pandemic and rapidly building out a massive and tailored safety net is fundamentally about the relation of the state to its citizens. From its first Assembly election in 1957, through alternating coalitions of Communist and Congress-led governments, iterated cycles of social mobilisation and state responses have forged what is in effect a robust social democracy. The current crisis underscores the comparative advantages of social democracy.

To begin with, social democracies are built on an encompassing social pact with a political commitment to providing basic welfare and broad-based opportunity to all citizens. In Kerala, the social pact itself emerged from recurrent episodes of popular mobilisation — from the temple entry movement of the 1930s, to the peasant and workers' movements in the 1950s and 1960s, a mass literacy movement in the 1980s, the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP)-led movement for people's decentralised planning in the 1990s, and, most recently, various gender and environmental movements. These movements not only nurtured a strong sense of social citizenship but also drove reforms that have incrementally strengthened the legal and institutional capacity for public action. Second, the emphasis on rights-based welfare has been driven by and in turn has reinforced a vibrant, organised civil society which demands continuous accountability from front-line state actors. Third, this constant demand-side pressure of a highly mobilised civil society and a competitive party system has pressured all governments in Kerala, regardless of the party in power, to deliver public services and to constantly expand the social safety net, in particular a public health system that is the best in India. Fourth, that pressure has also fuelled Kerala's push over the last two decades to empower local government. Nowhere in India are local governments as resourced and as capable as in Kerala. Finally, all of this ties into the greatest asset of any deep democracy, that is the generalised trust that comes from a State that has a wide and deep institutional surface area, and that on balance treats people not as subjects or clients, but as rights-bearing citizens.

## [Data | Kerala flattens the coronavirus curve but must remain vigilant as 'import' cases still dominate](#)

So how has this built-up capacity translated into both flattening the curve and putting broad and effective welfare measures in place? A government's capacity to respond to a cascading crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic relies on a very fragile chain of mobilising financial and societal resources, getting state actors to fulfil directives, coordinating across multiple authorities and jurisdictions and maybe, most importantly, getting citizens to comply. An effective response begins with programmatic decision-making.

From the moment of the first reported case in Kerala, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan convened a State response team that coordinated 18 different functional teams, held daily press conferences and communicated constantly with the public. Kerala's social compact demanded no less. Not only did Mr. Vijayan directly appeal to Malayalees' sense of citizenship by declaring that the response was less an enforcement issue than about people's participation, but also pointedly reminded the public that the virus does not discriminate, destigmatising the pandemic.

Also read | [How Kerala has handled the coronavirus crisis](#)

Second, the government was able to leverage a broad and dense health-care system that despite the recent growth of private health services, has maintained a robust public presence. Private provisioning of a public good has never made much sense, but as anyone watching the chaos in the United States has learned, there is nothing like a pandemic to expose the obvious coordination problems that for-profit health systems face. Kerala's public health-care workers are also of course highly unionised and organised, and from the outset the government lay emphasis on protecting the health of first responders.

Third, the government activated an already highly mobilised civil society. As the cases multiplied, the government called on two lakh volunteers to go door to door, identifying those at risk and those in need. A State embedded in civil society — the women's empowerment Kudumbasree movement being a case in point — was in a good position to co-produce effective interventions, from organising contact tracing to delivering three lakh meals a day through Kudumbasree community kitchens.

Fourth, you can get the politics right and you can have a great public health-care system, but its effectiveness in a crisis like this will only be as good as the infamous last kilometre. And this is where two decades of empowering local governments have clearly paid off. Whether in focalising containment efforts in hotspots, tracking down those who have been exposed or managing the broad array of direct benefits that have been distributed to migrant workers, the elderly and the differently abled, the key has been the capacity of state actors and civil society partners to coordinate their efforts at the level of panchayats, districts and municipalities.

[Interactive map of confirmed coronavirus cases in India | State-wise tracker for coronavirus cases, deaths and testing rates](#)

The pandemic is a physical exam of the social body, and never has public trust been put to a greater test. In democracies, compliance must be elicited. Asking citizens to stay at home, to give up work, and to trust that the individual sacrifices they make now are essential to preserving the well-being of the community going forward is never easy to do and especially not against an invisible enemy. Trust is hard to measure, but survey work that colleagues and I, working with the Bengaluru non-governmental organisation Janaagraha, recently conducted in 10 Indian cities that included Kochi, shows that across a wide range of measures, and across all classes, castes and religions, Malayalees have extremely high levels of trust in both their institutions and

locally elected local representatives. This, more than anything, points to the robust nature of Kerala's social compact.

Beyond the peak, every country in the world, and especially India, will be dealing with the economic and welfare consequences of the pandemic for years. This brutal, unpredictable, external shock is laying bare the most essential as well as the most complicated challenges of democratic citizenship. In moments like these, the authoritarian temptation for some is irresistible. U.S. President Donald Trump has claimed "total" authority and is threatening to usurp the power of Governors, the Bharatiya Janata Party has exploited the crisis to communalise the pandemic and to silence its critics, and things are as bad as they are to begin with because of China's authoritarian DNA. At a time when India's democracy was already in crisis, it is important to be reminded that Kerala has managed the crisis with the most resolve, the most compassion and the best results of any large State in India. And that it has done so precisely by building on legacies of egalitarianism, social rights and public trust.

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