

OLD CHALLENGES IN BUILDING A NEW KERALA

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

“Rebuilding is different from repairing and demands a paradigm shift in the concept and strategy of development.” A scene from Paravur in Kerala after the floods. REUTERS

For the Kerala government, the Nava Kerala (new Kerala) Mission, which seeks to address problems in four key sectors, has only become a bigger challenge after the 2018 floods. A [Post-Disaster Needs Assessment \(PDNA\) report](#), prepared by a team of 76 international experts in collaboration with the State government, estimates that 31,000 crore, which was 4% of the GSDP in 2018-19, is needed to rebuild the State. Reconstructing 17,316 houses, repairing 46,000 houses, rebuilding 1,613 schools, etc. are herculean tasks. Turning this challenge into an opportunity depends on the will and vision of the people. Rebuilding is different from repairing and demands a paradigm shift in the concept and strategy of development. A novel vision and holistic approach must replace the prevailing ad hoc approach. The PDNA report provides an excellent starting point for this.

For any purposeful rebuilding, we need to identify both the strength and capabilities of the State as well as its major failures. Kerala has a fascinating human development narrative and a rich biodiversity. Since the Communist Party of India ascended to power in Kerala in 1957, the State has abolished landlordism, managed a literacy rate that is more than 90%, provided affordable healthcare, ensured decentralised people’s planning, and seen the growing inflow of foreign remittances. However, social failures such as widening inequality, marginalisation of the most vulnerable sections of society, an increase in the crime rate, atrocities against women and children, a high suicide rate, and road accidents have been ignored by decision-makers.

Antonio Gramsci famously said that politics means conscious action (praxis) in pursuit of a common goal. While adversarial politics is part of democratic practice, the polarising approach which Kerala witnesses today is unhelpful in the context of rebuilding. New political idioms through discussions are important, for no society can meaningfully function without some presumption of trust and openness. The State needs significant transparency guarantees. Transparency guarantees — “the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity”, as Amartya Sen observes — have an instrumental role “in preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhand dealings”. Rent-seeking and growing disregard for the rule of law cannot be the basis for rebuilding.

Today Kerala is told that it should recapture the spirit of renaissance. One needs to clarify this. It is discovering and rediscovering the essence of humanity, which has been under a cloud in recent times. Like the Enlightenment in Europe that threw up reason against religious fundamentalism, Narayana Guru brought out the significance of freedom for those who were suffering caste and class unfreedoms. The moot question is whether Kerala will sink preconceived religious prejudices and political fundamentalism and imbue the public sphere with reason.

The project requires the participation of the local government, and decentralised planning. The third tier of governance in Kerala comprising nearly 22,000 elected representatives is known for its multistage planning process and people’s participation. What is wrong in making the local government the centre of recovery and rebuilding?

The current debates and the PDNA report are silent on urban governance. Several problems in Kerala arise out of the failure to address the issue of a rising urban population. Urban Kerala has

the highest monthly per capita consumption expenditure in India. As a result, the report estimates the daily municipal solid waste production in Kerala to be at 10,044 tonnes. This is besides the colossal disaster debris that remains to be cleared. It is not difficult to revive the gram sabha spirit of the past as part of the rebuilding project. Section 55 of the Kerala Municipality Act, 1994 provides for the creation of a State Development Council presided over by the Chief Minister with the Chief Secretary as Convener and comprising members of the Council of Ministers and leaders of panchayats and municipalities. Both the United Democratic Front and the Left Democratic Front have wasted this institution. The State Development Council can be made the umbrella organisation that will integrate the Nava Kerala Mission and the local government to serve as the centrepiece of the rebuilding project.

Many people speak of making Kerala a green State. A green economy is not possible without an understanding of the havoc that has been done to the land-use pattern through indifferent policies and action. Reminiscent of Keats' line, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever", Kerala has to be consciously conserved — not just for tourists but for everyone. Human beings have to rely on nature's resources for survival, but aggressive development invites nature's wrath in the form of landslides and floods.

The change in land-use pattern and water management has resulted in a sharp decline in the area under paddy: from 35% of the crop area in the 1960s to 7% today. Rice cultivation is done on watershed basis. The water scarcity that Kerala faces today is largely linked to paddy reclamation. Since the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act was belatedly passed in 2008, not much has happened except the ratification of all the illegal transgressions.

Unless we realise that the quarrying, metal crushing and sand mining mafias are endangering Kerala's ecosystem, no meaningful land use and mining policy can be implemented. The Seventh Report of the Legislative Environment Committee regarding the working of the quarries speaks of the pathological environmental management underway in Kerala. Placating vocal voter interests (as in throwing away the Gadgil report) can never be the way to build common good and sustainable development. The PDNA recommendations for an integrated water resource management approach should never be neglected.

Why the tribals and the historically marginalised remain neglected is a question that needs to be raised as part of the rebuilding project. Indeed, the disasters have brought to sharp focus once again the vulnerabilities of the poor in general as well as of the elderly, women, the transgenders, and the disabled. Given Kerala's growing elderly phenomenon, the three million migrant labourers will have to be made a dignified part of its social life. Will Kerala see rebuilding as an opportunity to put an end to the social exclusion through structural reforms and action?

A road policy that aims to reduce accidents should be another priority of the rebuilding project. In 2018, nearly 4,800 people died in road accidents. The State needs a Road Reconstruction Policy that will reduce such accidents. If Kerala is to consciously be rebuilt as a thing of beauty, half the battle will be won.

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