

REVIVING THE 'KERALA MODEL' OF DEVELOPMENT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Important Aspects of Governance, Transparency & Accountability including Right to Information and Citizen Charter

Kerala has long been recognised to have done many things right. For years the darling of development experts, non-governmental organisations and social activists, the 'Kerala Model' seemed to show that impressive levels of human development indicators — in health, education and quality of life, comparable even to some rich countries — could be achieved without a correspondingly high level of income.

But in the recent past, there has been a new debate on the 'Kerala Model' of development. Are we not guilty of exporting our unemployment and becoming over-dependent on remittances? Can you build high growth and strong human development indicators on such a flimsy basis? Is it sustainable? The focus in the new debates on Kerala seems increasingly on its failures: low employment, low levels of food intake and low incomes, accompanied by high levels of alcoholism and the nation's worst suicide rate.

After decades of robust social spending and participatory governance, the lustre of the Kerala model is now under threat from emerging social and environmental risks. Indeed, there is an irony here: some of the very strengths of Kerala's approach have become sources of vulnerability. For instance, its high life expectancy is translating into a high death rate from COVID-19.

In the face of rising risks, the Kerala model needs to be revitalised. The crucial question is how.

Reflecting the State's social outcomes, Kerala has India's highest literacy rate despite ranking only the ninth-highest in per capita income among 28 States. But as new global risks emerge in areas from health to climate change, Kerala's policies need to be bolstered and new challenges deftly managed. Severely hit by COVID-19, Kerala's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) contracted over 2019-20 and 2021-22, and unemployment, at 9%, is much higher than the 6% national average. The space to revive Kerala's sagging economy is limited because of a high fiscal deficit, around 4% of GSDP.

These difficulties could be meaningfully mitigated by smarter socio-economic investments, attention to good governance, and a far better stewardship of the environment. Kerala can develop as a knowledge economy, improve the quality of higher education and vocational training to meet the requirements of a modern workforce, and build on successes in tourism and hospitality services. All this will create meaningful employment and raise incomes.

Our focus should be on the quantity as well as quality of health and education, and on ensuring that interventions reach all segments of the population. Basic education should continue to be a priority, but it is higher education that presents a pivotal opportunity on the global stage for Kerala — a State with high human capital and high population mobility. Played right, Kerala could become a regional, if not a national, centre for tertiary education in areas such as marine biology, health care, and digital technology, where it has considerable expertise.

Kerala was India's first digital State with the highest share of households with personal computers and Internet connections, mobile phone penetration, and digital literacy. Digital tools are being widely used in Kerala's COVID-19 response — for example, application of India's eSanjeevani, a telemedicine portal, offering psycho-social support for those struggling with the virus or its after-effects. We can build on and expand such approaches, learning, for instance,

from Singapore's new generation of health apps and technologies.

Serious gaps are growing in Kerala's health system. A pandemic response that laid a stress on mask-wearing and social distancing and tracing got off to a vigorous early start. But infections and deaths skyrocketed in 2021, partly as the population is highly mobile and also because Kerala let its guard down in key areas of surveillance. Testing, on the other hand, has been widespread, which helped reveal infections more transparently. Sustaining the edge on health care should be high on the policy agenda.

Another strength that needs to be sustained involves institutions, building on the State's grassroots organisation, participatory governance, and a free press. The Public Affairs Index 2020 ranked Kerala as the best-governed large State in 2019 on the basis of 50 indicators reflecting equity, growth and sustainability. Decentralised governance, a strong grass-roots-level network of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), volunteer groups, and Kudumbashree members helped in pandemic management. While there are lessons for others, Kerala needs to be more agile in public expenditure on health and developing local self-delivery systems.

An asset that has turned into a worrying flash point is the State's rich but fragile ecology that requires heightened protection. Decades of ecological degradation amplified the impact of the 2018 floods in Kerala that took some 483 lives, displaced 14.5 lakh people, and cost over 40,000 crore. It is vital that the Madhav Gadgil Committee report is adopted with the minimal necessary modifications to protect vulnerable populations. The ecological disaster across the Western Ghats needs to be confronted and investments made to repair forests, river systems, water bodies, and flood plains. The State needs a bold programme of forest restoration in keeping with the commitments on forest protection from over 130 nations at COP26.

Kerala urgently needs to revive its network of rivers, their tributaries and streams. Sand mining needs to be stopped until the sandy riverbeds are restored. Water management calls for the periodic release of water from the dams, as indicated by the World Commission on Dams. This, together with desilting of dams, could control the quantity of run-off into the dams and the need for sudden releases that exacerbate floods. Kerala's supply of fresh water is being jeopardised by inadequate facilities for water containment. Water quality — and people's health — are hurt by domestic waste and industrial effluents, calling for better water treatment.

A reinvigorated Kerala model will do well to recognise the symbiotic links among social outcomes, environmental management, and participatory governance, and take actions that cut across these areas. It is time for revival. We must open our mental horizons to the world, outgrow our shopworn ideologies and create investment and business-friendly conditions for sustainable development.

One prerequisite for achieving sustainable development would be to change the perceptions of the State in our extremely politicised environment, especially the notorious *hartals* over marginal political issues, which have driven investment away. Political parties can differ on the precise policies and investments needed, but they must come together on a platform that transcends their differences. Sree Narayana Guru famously said, "*matham ethayalum, manushyan nannayalmathi* — whatever his religion, it is enough that a man be good." Similarly, Kerala must say, "*rashtriyam ethayalum, rashtram nannayalmathi* — whatever the politics, it is enough that the country be better."

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