

Kerala's development paradox

In April 2017, the Pinarayi Vijayan-led Left Democratic Front government [celebrated the 60th anniversary](#) of the State's Legislative Assembly. The centrality of the first communist government in the celebration was very important, for it was the first democratically elected communist government anywhere, and it was this government which laid the foundation for modern Kerala. In its turbulent existence of nearly 28 months, that government tried to reshape Kerala's social patterns, centering on land and society, among other things.

Gains of social movements

The rise of the Communist Party of India to power in 1957 was the culmination of a number of social movements that caused a churning in society. Central to this was the formation of the Communist Party itself in Kerala in December 1939. The party took upon itself the task of liberating peasants and workers from their caste-based and feudalistic socio-economic thralldom. Under its leadership, social movements with land rights as their core demand became mass based and protracted. More importantly, the party strategically turned the struggles of tenants for land rights into struggles of tenants, the landless and the land-poor for land ownership rights.

A non-state view of Kerala

Broadly, the cumulative gains of the social movements and the communist regimes since 1957 were weakening of the caste and religious systems in interpersonal relations, though anti-communists still deployed them for political gains; emboldening the traditionally oppressed groups to take on their oppressors; strengthening fraternity across castes and communities; imparting a strong sense of social inclusiveness which was lacking till then; and deepening democracy and its institutions as nowhere else in India.

The social dynamics of these movements for the next four decades, and the State's people-centric bottom-up approach to planning and development initiated by the first ministry and which subsequent ministries had to follow as they came to be socially embedded in people's psyche, resulted in what has been applauded as the "Kerala phenomenon", making Kerala the first in many respects. Kerala is the first State where caste has lost much of its virulence, and those traditionally living at the margins of society have moved to its centre with dignity and self-confidence. It is the first to build State-wide grass-roots movements of peasants, workers and other oppressed sections. It is the first to experiment with coalition politics and stabilise it through coalition governance. It is the first to achieve universal literacy and high levels of life expectancy. More importantly, it is the first and probably the only State where civil society succeeded for a while in wresting for itself from an otherwise obtrusive State the largest space as an autonomous sphere for social mobilisation and political articulation. As the social gains by 1957 were considerable and continued for quite some time, and Kerala still ranks high in the Human Development Index, critics might ask if the State continues to retain these gains. The answer is yes and no.

Change in land use

On the negative side, though the peasantry got their land rights after prolonged struggles, Kerala became "depeasantised" in a blink. As land markets emerged, over the years agricultural land changed hands in different ways for non-agricultural purposes. Now the relevance of land is mainly for industries, housing and investment, though by one account Kerala has more than one lakh unoccupied houses. The real estate mafia has changed Kerala's social landscape, which was once the delight of anthropologists and tourists alike.

A piece of Jharkhand in Kerala

Successive governments after the first Ministry did not ensure that the lands assigned through the reforms were used only for agricultural purposes and tenancy which was legally abolished did not crop up. They also did not look into the legality of excluding plantations from the reforms though they were government lands leased out on a pittance (and the lands involved in such leases are thousands of acres).

As the Communist Party rose to power riding on massive social movements, the absence of such movements, particularly after the death of A.K. Gopalan, one of the most popular communist leaders, in March 1977 may eventually turn out to be communism's death. If Kerala in the past could be proud of its civil society, which was built on social movements, the absence of such movements has already weakened civil society, and is weakening it further as the State is on a fast-track of colonisation of land for commerce, gated communities, and so on.

Reactionary politics is back

Communism appealed to about one-third of the population when the first communist ministry was voted to power. This should mean that Kerala by and large remained anti-communist. Despite this, it is through the communist movements that Kerala's civil society was built up. The social and political vacuum caused by the absence of these movements to which E.M.S. Namboodiripad and other leaders belonged has resulted in the resurgence of reactionary politics centring on caste and religion.

Writer Paul Zacharia saw this regressive ambience as peculiar for a number of reasons. He wrote in 2007: "Society as a whole (in Kerala) was more secular, progressive, even rationalist, in the 1950s, 60s and 70s than it is today. Those were the heady days of the Left when a democratic revolution seemed about to bloom... But the 90s saw Kerala's most startling somersault into a black hole of crude bhakti, superstition and blind ritual, cutting across all religions. Religion suddenly emerged as a money-machine."

Land for agricultural purposes is no longer part of the agenda of any State or the Centre. If in the past the usage "land is to rule" meant feudalistic control of land, now it is used in the context of corporate colonialism, of which religion is not only an integral part but also a pernicious purveyor of communal hate and a great polariser of communal formations for political purposes.

The "Kerala phenomenon" has not made the State a land of milk and honey. While the State's democratic polity is characterised by corruption and related afflictions of the larger Indian polity, the unwelcome side-effects of the "Kerala phenomenon" are seen in the State having the highest unemployment rate in the country, especially among the educated; having one of the highest suicide rates; and in the increasing neglect of the aged, presumably because of large-scale migration of the youth.

Even if change is the only constant, it is the vitality of Kerala's past which enriched its present. That vitality is post-colonial and in the long haul of social movements centring on land and society. Both these are not present now.

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