

MUCH MUST CHANGE IN KERALA

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

Nilambur, Kerala, 30/08/2018: A sight of Landslide in Adyanpara village 8 km from Nilambur town in Malappuram District. 7 persons in a family along with their home washed off from this area by a heavy landslip due to the nonstop rain in Kerala in the month of August 2018. Photo: Shaju John/The Hindu | Photo Credit: [Shaju John](#)

In a national calamity, people look towards a leader to extend them empathy, a sense of somebody being in charge and a route to a more secure future. By any measure, Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala, has lived up to expectation on the first two aspects and may be expected to play a role in identifying the third after the State has had to face its biggest disaster in a century in the form of floods. He has reflected gravitas, displayed pragmatism and expressed a willingness to take assistance from any source. The last is a necessary corrective at a time when false pride, standing in the way of accepting the hand of friendship extended from the outside, is projected as a desirable nationalism. At the very same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the extraordinary outpouring of humanity and material assistance towards the people of Kerala from the rest of India. It is difficult to recall something on this scale as a response to a calamity in a distant corner of the country in recent times.

Now that the Chief Minister has affirmed that the “last person has been rescued”, rehabilitation is progressing and plans are afoot to rebuild Kerala, it is hoped that the last will be approached with an open mind. This would be a mindset that recognises that much must change in Kerala’s civil society, which in turn would trigger change at the level of governance. Indeed a paradigm shift, being a profound change in the perception of progress, is needed. The central element in this new perception must be that a continuous decline of a society’s natural capital cannot be seen as compatible with progress. Kerala has justifiably been identified as having carved out a niche, and not just in India but globally, as a society with high human development at a relatively low level of income. While it may be pointed out that globally, many other societies, particularly to the east of India, have achieved the same in terms of some standard social indicators, it must be remembered that, as a part of India, it had also to deal with an ossified social structure in the form of caste and the inequalities it perpetuated. Social stratification was far less in east Asian societies making it easier for them to transform. For Kerala to have overcome this burden through a non-violent political revolution is a considerable achievement.

At times though, stories of our success relayed across the world may lead us to be somewhat swayed by praise. This may have happened to the leadership of Kerala society which extends beyond the political class to its intellectuals. While focussing on certain aspects of a society, external observers could miss others that are just as crucial in evaluating its development. Laudatory evaluations of Kerala have masked the decline in natural capital and associated ecosystem services that have accompanied the rise in income. The decline in natural capital has ranged from deforestation that contributes to rainwater run-off contributing to landslides, to sand-mining that leads to rivers over-flowing their banks, and building on the flood plains that were meant to provide a cushion. All of these contribute to flooding.

When we have it upon the word of Madhav Gadgil — who may be considered India’s ecological voice and has studied the Kerala topography and its alteration — that human action may have exacerbated the consequences of the unusually heavy rain this year, we would be advised to hear the message. We know exactly the corrective actions necessary to reverse, possibly only at a glacial pace at that, the accumulated man-made factors responsible for this. At the centre of it is consumption. In relation to the ecological damage that it can wreak, Kerala consumes too

much. At the centre of this consumption is luxury housing and commercial holiday resorts, of course luxurious. Structures much larger than necessary cover the soil with concrete, heightening rainwater run-off, and through their weight increase subsidence. Houses here have historically been built with sand mined from rivers. Once this source got exhausted, river sand has been replaced by manufactured sand which is a by-product of quarrying. Large-scale quarrying has meant lopping off the top of hills and allowing water to seep into them, making them unstable. So at the back of much of the human factor that has exacerbated the flooding by changing the landscape is luxury housing. It is significant too that some of this housing is not even used or has very few persons living in them. This is hardly a rational use of a scarce resource such as land, especially when it has known catastrophic consequences.

Altogether, Kerala's much-acclaimed development trajectory is unsustainable as demonstrated during the recent floods, and needs a change. The needed change is radical and the reality is that its past cannot be a guide to its future. This past has been one of human development, but Kerala society as a whole now needs to reorient its relationship with nature. However inclusive this development may have been — and there is reason to believe that some of the claims made are exaggerated — that by itself does not ensure that the assault on nature will now end. Only the State's civil society can guarantee its future on this score. Political parties are loathe to speak the language of responsible consumption for fear of losing out on votes.

While, going forward, a path-breaking environmental movement in Kerala's civil society is necessary, it does not mean that governance in Kerala should be left unaccountable out of concern for peaceability. Even in a past that has witnessed progress in the form of an elimination of social barriers, government in Kerala has remained unaccountable with respect to the economy. Malayalis have had to migrate in large numbers, leaving their families behind, to keep the home fires burning. Now with the new challenge of ecological sustainability arising, government — by which is meant the entire public sector — needs to assume accountability for the depletion of natural capital. Someone has to take responsibility for the pattern of land use in Kerala, the pathologies of which extend to building resorts on hillsides, turning every public space into a refuse dump for used plastic, and the continuous alienation of agricultural land, all of which may have had a role in exacerbating the floods. It is by now clear that the decentralisation of government has been unable to prevent these developments. Land use in the State needs review at the level of the State government.

Mr. Vijayan has been statesmanlike in saying that he will take material assistance from every quarter. He must now extend this approach to listening to independent voices on the rebuilding of Kerala. The obvious place to start would be to institute a public review of the dams in Kerala and how they are operated, focussing in particular on how their operation may have affected the flooding. Such a demand has been made by a section of Kerala's legislators. Even a conservative body such as the World Bank had instituted an independent review of the Sardar Sarovar Project in the 1990s, and tailored its policy accordingly. Considerations of both transparency and confidence of the people in the functioning of the government machinery demand that such a review be instituted at the earliest.

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