

# Kerala: An Anomalous Case of Development

Tsewang Rigzin MDP

Graduate Student of Development Practicite at Emory University, 201 Dowman Drive, Atlanta GA 30322, US.

Corresponding author: tsewang.rigzin@emory.edu.

While slipping behind rest of Indian State in field of economic growth, the Kerala ranks first in many human development indicators, many of which are on a par with some of developed countries. With the total literacy rate of 94%, (GoI Census report, 2011.) Kerala not only stood first from rest of Indian state but higher than the world average literacy rate of 84.1% (C.I.A. World Fact Book, 2010.) and developed society such as Hong Kong (93.5%). The life expectancy of Kerala at 71.4 (GoI Census report, 2011.) is 8.8 years longer than national average of 62.6 (GoI Census report, 2011.) and 1.4 years longer than world average of 70 years (WHO, 2011.) This distinctive achievement in various dimensions of human development with relatively low economic growth rate has caught the attention of many analysts and practitioners of development. (Sen, 2001. Lieten, 2002. Kapur, 1998. Tharamangalam, 1999. Franke and Chasin, 1999.)

This unique paradox, which is often termed as the 'Kerala Model' has brought some interesting questions in the mainstream discussion on development studies and practices. Some of these questions are: Is this unique social development in Kerala an outcome of role-played by radical left politics in the state? Is economic growth indispensable for social development as proponents of neoliberalism and 'modernization theory' argues? How sustainable and replicable the 'Kerala model' or the 'Kerala experience' is? To answer these pertinent questions, it is essential to see what are the historical foundations and other factors, on which these development took place?

## Kerala: God's Own Country

'God's own country', as fondly called by the people of Kerala themselves, is one of twenty-eight States of Union of India. Surrounded with Arabian Sea in the west and the Western Ghats in the east, it enjoys diverse geographical features. With total area of 38,863 Km<sup>2</sup> and population of 33.3 millions, (GoI Census report, 2011.) Kerala is relatively small administrative unit. With its distinct topography, rich resource endowment and strategic location on trans-national trade corridor, Kerala have had extra edge over neighboring Indian States of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. (Franke and Chasin, 1989. p. 22)

Kerala's long coastline of 590 km permitted vibrant trading and cultural relation with rest of the world. For instance, Kerala was major spice exporter from as early as 3000 BCE and remained important trade route through out the medieval period. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.23) Beside such trade with countries in Europe and Middle East, vibrant cultural exchange took place with trading partners. In addition to indigenous Hindu religion, the Arab merchants brought with them Islam to Kerala in as early as 7th century. With total population of 24.7%, (GoI Census report, 2011.) it is now second most practiced religion in Kerala. The arrival of Christianity in Kerala took much earlier when St. Thomas landed on Kerala coast in 52 A.D. Today with 20% of Kerala's population as Christian, (GoI Census report, 2011.) it is third most practices religion in Kerala. With this diverse faith and culture, Kerala has a reputation of being one of the most

culturally and communally tolerant states in India.

Does these features of Kerala's unique ecological advantages and trade and cultural exchanges have anything to do with impressive improvement that the state has witness in field of social development? Well, it might not be the sole causes but it surely has played significant role in laying foundation upon which such development could take place.

### **The Period of Colonialism and Birth of New Development Alliances (1400-1947)**

Kerala have the longest histories of European colonization in India. The Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama landed in Kozhikode in 1498 A. D. and this marked the beginning of European Colonization in India. Dutch and British followed the Portuguese colonization in Kerala. By the end of 18th Century, the whole of Kerala fell under the control of British colonist. However, ruler of Cochin and Travancore, two of three-major Malayalam speaking region, signed treaty of subsidiary alliance with British and become princely state of British India. This treaty allows the ruler of those two princely states a regional autonomy in return for fixed annual tribute to the British.

It was during this period that Kerala witness several social and educational reforms directed toward eradication of social evils such as practices of 'untouchability' and Sati system. The role-played by rulers of princely state, Christian missionaries and other social reformers have made significant contribution in creating welfare system in Kerala in general and progress of education in particular. For instance, the Rani (Queen) Gouri Parvati Bai of Travancore princely state's 1817 proclamation on policy of diffusion of education to masses. (Sen. 1991.) This proclamation states "state should defray the entire cost of education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment among them". (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.49) With specific and functioning public health department in later part of 19th Century, the princely state of Travancore was also considered as the pioneer of public health system in India. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.38) The mortality rate started declining in early 20th Century and by 1940, the state of Kerala had lowest death rate in India. Those significant past accomplishments in social development have laid down a solid foundation for

today's impressive progress made on various dimension of social development.

### **Post Independence: (1947-1990s)**

The communist party led by E.M.S. Namboodiripad was democratically elected by people of the state and thus formed the first government of newly formed Malayalam speaking state of Kerala in 1957. This new state government was one of first democratically elected communist government in the World and India. This success of communist party in Kerala at the height of cold war period not only raised the eyebrow of Congress led Central government of India but also that of C.I.A. (Thomas Isaac, 2008.)

Soon after taking oath of Chief Minister, EMS's government introduced Radical Land Reform Ordinance (The Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, 1957) and later made into an act and Education bill (which eventually failed to pass through state assembly). These radical policy initiatives invited massive uproar from the elites and opposition from Congress led Central Government and eventually first EMS's government had to face premature death in 1959. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.6) Other land reform bills (1963, 1964 and 1969) subsequently followed the first land reform ordinance passed by EMS government in 1960.

The 1969's land reform under coalition government led by EMS is considered one of the most successful of its kind in south Asia. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.54) Some important feature of this land reform are: a the rice levy to be collected from largest land owner and redistribute to the poor through fair price shop; ceiling on land holding and redistribution of exceeds land to landless; and abolition of tenancy. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.54) These radical land reforms played very significant role in creating, what many calls, a golden period (1970-1990) of development in Kerala.

To appreciate the significance of these land reforms, it is essential to analyze the distribution of land in Kerala prior to reforms. Like most societies in India, the Kerala, at the beginning of 20th Century was feudal agrarian society. Most of the land ownership was concentrated with few landlords. As far as land distribution is concerned, Kerala was one of the most unequal states in India. (Oommen, 1971. p.10, Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.56) The data gathered

just before the land reform bill in 1969 have shown that 8.1 % of landlords controlled 44.4% of all rented land 61.8% irrigated rental land. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.56) The effect of this successful land reform on overall development of state was tremendous; millions of former tenants became small landowners and the element of exploitation and social injustice were drastically reduced.

The successive Kerala's government has also made tremendous progress on existingsound education and health policies of state. Kerala today, enjoys the glory of being first in field of literacy and health care index.Kerala indeed stand as an Everest in many of these fields, the focus of successive governments on these two fields have been remarkable. The successive state governments have made huge investment in field of social welfare in general and Health care and education in particular. The state have higher proportion of revenue expenditure on health and education compare to other Indian states right from 1960s. (Sakanandan, 2001)The successive governments of Kerala State from early communist party to various coalition parties have played the most significant role in putting Kerala at the top of social development index in India. AsProfessor Amartya Sen rightly put it, "Modern Kerala deserves credit for consolidating and building on past achievement."

## Conclusion

Among many lessons from Kerala's development experiences, one thing stand out of rest, i.e. "poor but prosperous." (Kapur, 1998.) The case of Kerala has brought some clear light on the 'Sen-Bhagwati' debate on growth first or development first. (Sharma, 2013) The Kerala experience hasclearly shown that a state/region can have high status of living in-spite of low economic growth.

One of the questions that really interest me is: what are main causes of this commendable accomplishment in social development and to whom these remarkable achievements in social development should be accredited?Many people attribute these achievements to the role played by Communist Party of Kerala in 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.If these achievements were result of communist party alone, then why is that their counter part in West Bengal State failed to do so?

The closer analysis on an anomalous development experience of Kerala reveals something else. As discussed earlier, the special ecology and natural resources endowment, trade and communication with rest of world, significant role-played by many social reformers of early 19th Century and education and welfare initiatives by progressive ruler of British India's princely states in Malaya speaking region of south India have laid a solid foundation for such development to take place. (Franke & Chasin, 1989. p.22)

On this foundation, the successive State governments, most notably, Communist Party of Kerala under the dedicated leadership of E.M.S. had created this distinctive success story of development. In short, the remarkable achievement of Kerala in social development field is result of various causes and conditions such as, ecological and resource endowment advantages, sound historical foundation, radical policy initiative of left party and active civil society.

However, Kerala's case is not a fairy tale story; in-spite of notable improvement in social welfare field, Kerala suffers from various problems, mostly in field of economic growth. With 25 % of unemployment, Kerala have one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. In spite of exceptional favorable weather for farming, the Kerala's agriculture growth rate remains negative and dependency on neighboring state on food grains and vegetable is increasing. While most of Indian states increase their industrial activities, Kerala's low investments in industrialization have worried many. A study hasshown that Kerala received only 0.30% of total industrial investment made in the country. (Viju, 2013)

With more than 2.5 million Keralites working in Gulf and other country, the dependency on overseas remittances is extremely high. The frequent strikes and harthals have limited the industrial development in state. (Oommen, 2008) The ever-growing consumer market without proportionate increase in agricultural and industrial product within the state, make Kerala vulnerable various externalities. The quality of education is yet another major problem that needs to be addressed in Kerala. (Sen, 2001.) Looking from these realities, it seems to me that before we look into feasibility of replicating of Kerala Model into other Indian state, it is important to see whether Kerala Model can survive in Kerala itself. In this light, the Kerala still have long way to go.

## References

- Census report of india 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.census2011.co.in/>
- Franke, Richard W. and Barbara H. Chasin. (1994). Kerala. Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State, San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy.
- Govindan Parayil (1996). 'The 'Kerala Model' of Development: Development and Sustainability in the Third World'. Third World Quarterly, Coverage: 1979-2007 (Vols. 1-28) Retrieved from <https://sustainability.water.ca.gov/documents/18/3334113/Sustainability%2Bin%2BKerala,%2BIndia.pdf>
- Govindan Parayil, (Editor) (2000). 'Kerala: The Development Experience' Zed Book Ltd.
- Kapur, Akash. 1998. Poor But Prosperous. The Atlantic Monthly. September.
- Mihir S. Sharma, (2013). 'Bhagwati versus Sen: What's going on?' Bussines Standard , July 25. 2013. Retrieved from [http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/bhagwati-versus-sen-what-s-going-on-113072400516\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/bhagwati-versus-sen-what-s-going-on-113072400516_1.html)
- Oommen M. A. (1999). "Rethinking Development: Kerala's Development Experience". Concept Publishing Company.
- Oommen M.A. (2008). 'Capabilities, Reform and the Kerala Model' Institute of Social Sciences
- Sadanandan, R. (2001). 'Government Health Services in Kerala: Who Benefits?' Economic and Political Weekly. **36**(32). 3071–3077.
- Viju. B. (2013). 'Is Kerala's development a chimera?' Time of India, September 29. 2013. Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/Is-Keralas-development-a-chimera/articleshow/23223077.cms>