

# Revisiting three anxieties of Kerala's development- Growth, Education and Gender Justice

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Kerala is a state that has received national and international attention for its high human development achievements. But not everything was rosy, and several scholars have pointed out the limitations and lacunas of the state's development experience. This paper looks into three such anxieties on the state's development model, expressed nearly two decades ago. The three concerns taken in this paper are the state's economic growth, education and gender justice. In this paper, the author revisits these anxieties to examine whether there is persistence or progress on the considered issues. This paper is based on secondary data and literature. Both promising and persisting facets of the three dimensions are pointed out.

**Keywords:** Kerala, growth, migration, education, exclusion, gender justice

Kerala is a state which has received both national and international attention ever since the United Nations- Centre for Development Studies publication drew attention to the high achievements in education and health of the state (UN & CDS, 1975). It was often referred to as the Kerala model of development. They referred to the attainment of human development indicators even without robust economic growth. Kerala's achievements are located in its history of *public action*. Amartya Sen has highlighted the role of public action in bringing about Kerala's social achievements. Kerala received an early start in educating its people, be it through the introduction of a modern system of education by the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, be it the role which Christian missionaries played and the various social reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century demanding education for its members. In the post-independence period, the role of the Communist Party assumes special importance in setting the pro-poor development agenda of the state and to some extent, the agenda of other political parties. The government adopted several pro-poor measures, which are believed to have resulted in Kerala's kind of development. But not everything was rosy, and several scholars pointed out the limitations and lacunas of the state's development experience.

This paper looks into three anxieties on the state's development model, expressed nearly two decades ago<sup>1</sup>. The three concerns taken in this paper are the state's economic growth, education and gender justice. The first research question concerns the apprehensions expressed about the state's growth. As the state's growth is believed to be fuelled by migration, scholars have expressed anxiety on whether such growth is sustainable and vulnerable to conditions in Gulf countries. This is an opportune time to look into the issue as the state is currently facing a considerable decline in emigration. The second question is on education in the state. While lauding the quantitative achievements in education, concerns were raised on the quality of the same and tendencies to exclude the weaker sections of society in educational mobility. The paper examines the current status of this. The final question is on gender justice in the state, where queries were raised decades before on the 'myth of the high status of women in Kerala. In this paper, the author revisits these anxieties to examine whether there is persistence or progress on the considered issues. This paper is based on secondary data and literature. Observation-based on personal experience is made in the footnote.

## **Economic growth of Kerala: Vulnerable to Gulf conditions?**

Kerala model was celebrated initially because of its high social development despite low economic growth. For almost thirty years, the state's economic growth trailed much below the national average from the late fifties till the latter half of the 1980s (Chakraborty, 2004). Low economic growth, in turn, had fiscal implications on the state and the level of employment. A change in the trend of low economic growth is observed from 1987 to 88. The state showed a higher growth rate from 1987 to 88, which has continued since then. The growth rate of the state domestic product at constant prices during the period 1987-88 to 2000-01 rose to 6.0 per cent as against 1.88 per cent between 1971-72 and 1986-87. The growth rate during the period 2000-01 to 2006-07 was still higher at 8.1 per cent, which was more than that for the country (7.1 per cent) (Government of India, 2009). Kerala's growth

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<sup>1</sup> The author had compiled Kerala's development narratives as part of her doctoral work. (George, 2012)

is a service sector-driven growth as the service sector dominates its contribution to SGDP and employment.

There were two arguments for Kerala's economic growth. Some scholars saw the growth turnaround as Kerala entering a virtuous cycle of development, meaning taking off into a sustained path of development in the wake of reforms, making the achievements in human development the base (Kannan, 2005). Some others saw it more sceptically, wondering about the sustainability of Kerala's growth (Oommen, 2005). The consumption-oriented service sector-led growth fuelled by the Gulf remittances is transient and vulnerable. Here, we currently take stock of how the state is faring in economic growth. Taking stock now is especially relevant as the state is facing a decline in migration, a phenomenon attributed to having driven economic growth. We would be able to assess whether Kerala's economic growth is indeed transient and vulnerable to Gulf conditions. Number of emigrants peaked at 24 lakhs in 2012 and declined to 21.2 lakhs in 2019 (Kannan & Hari, 2020). The economic slowdown in the gulf, state policies favouring replacement of migrants with local labour, the influx of labour from Africa and the Philippines and of late, the pandemic are considered reasons for the decline of migration in Kerala.

Kerala Economic Review, 2020 gives the growth rates of Kerala from 2013 to 2019, the pre-pandemic year. The table presents the results.

**TABLE 1.** Growth Rate of Kerala from the 2013-2014

<i>Year</i>	<i>Growth rate of GSVA (at constant prices, 2011-12)</i>
2013-14	4.3
2014-15	3.8
2015-16	5.3
2016-17	7.1
2017-18	5.8
2018-19	6.2
2019-20 (partly influenced by pandemic)	2.58

Source: Economic Review, 2020

The state had low growth rates from 2013 to 2015, after which the growth rate rose in all four years until 2019-20. Several factors, demonetisation, problems with GST, natural disasters, and epidemics, have affected the state since 2016. Alongside was a national and global recession. Despite this, the state-managed a reasonably good growth rate until 2019-20, when the growth rate plunged to 2.58 due to pandemics. There was probably not much alarm on the setback to migration because the remittances continued to grow despite the return of emigrants due to the change in the profile of emigrants, who were increasingly having above higher secondary education and who are getting employed in professional services. Despite slow growth, remittances have grown and not declined (Kannan & Hari, 2020). Secondly, robust growth of certain sectors within the state probably offset the adverse impact of return migration. KER 2020 reports a turnaround in the performance of the manufacturing sector, the construction sector reviving after two-year stagnancy in 2016-17, fast growth in finance, real estate and professional services, which includes IT, growth in the fishing and aqua sector, trade, hotels, restaurants, and growth in social services mainly health and education.

To conclude, the state's growth seems to have stood the test of time and is not even crucially impacted by a setback in migration until now. The state's human development achievements helped it get increased remittances from abroad. Kerala is today a relatively rich state with a per capita annual income of Rs. 1,49,563 in 2019-20 is way above the Rs national per capita income. 96, 152. But increasing natural disasters/ epidemics can be very challenging to the state. Also, the chronic fiscal deficit of the state holds it back from several development initiatives. The tax- SGDP ratio remains low, despite the state's economic growth and per capita income upturn.

### *Education in Kerala: Concerns of Quality and Exclusion*

Kerala has achieved near-universal elementary education for decades now (Centre for Development Studies (CDS) & Government of Kerala (GoK), 2006) and very low drop-out rates in school education. Assessing the situation currently, one finds Kerala still stands at the topmost among Indian states. There seems to be a very substantial reduction in the dropout ratios, particularly in the vulnerable groups in Kerala.

**TABLE 2.** Drop out ratio among school children

<i>Drop out ratio among school children</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>ST</i>
2005-06 (I-X)*	4.9	16.31	51.1
2019-20 **(School Education)	0.08	0.11	1.17

Source \*: Government of India (2005-06) 'Selected Educational Statistics (2005-06)', Department of Higher Education, New Delhi: Ministry of Human resource Development \*\* - Directorate of general education

On the flip side, concerns were raised about the quality of education and tendencies of exclusion through education. The increase of private unaided schools is considered indirect evidence of the quality problem in schools owned or aided (George et al., 2003). Yet another study done by National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) ranked Kerala below 17 other states regarding levels of learning achieved by school students (CDS & GOK, 2006). Revisiting this issue after a decade and a half, we find certain statistics telling us that the state is keen to address this issue of quality of school education. "Pothu Vidyabhyasa Samrakshana Yajnam", or the educational mission of the government of Kerala, attempts to make school education inclusive by improving the quality of government schools. Particular focus has been given to improving the infrastructure of government schools and enabling education through ICT. The government set up Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE) as a State Government enterprise to modernise education in the state. As part of this project, classrooms are being made high tech, having a laptop, high-speed broadband internet connectivity and networking and access to the SAMAGRA resource portal (digital resources for all the subjects from Class 1 to 12). Almost 4,751 secondary schools and 7,887 primary schools have broadband connectivity for ICT enabled learning (Economic Review 2021). Compared to previous years, around 1,28,504 new students sought admissions in government and government-aided schools, with Covid 19 pandemic and resultant fall in income being a major reason. But even before the pandemic, probably due to the government's efforts, KER 2019 reports how there is an increasing tendency among parents to switch their children's education from private schools to government and government-aided schools. There are other indicators that the quality of education is on the rise. Kerala has emerged at the top among the 20 large Indian States with a score of 76.6 out of 100 in the School Education Quality Index, which includes aspects like learning outcomes, access outcomes, infrastructure outcomes and equity outcomes and the availability of teachers, attendance of both teachers and students, administrative adequacy and so forth (Economic Review 2021). Regarding learning outcomes, evaluated by National Achievement Survey, 2017, while Kerala has done fairly well compared to other states and UTs, the state needs to improve students' performance in various disciplines like languages, social science and mathematics<sup>2</sup>.

On tendencies of exclusion, studies nearly two decades ago had pointed out how unless government schools offer education and modern skills on par with private schools, the exclusion of children belonging to the weaker sections from higher education, particularly professional education, would ensue. For instance, Kumar (2004), covering government medical colleges across Kerala, mentions that only 2.8 per cent of the students in medical colleges were from the low-income group. The poor students could not crack the difficult competitive exams in the absence of both schooling, which has an orientation towards it, and coaching classes. Almost two decades after this study, one does not find much change in the situation. KER 2019 reports how the Proportion of SC/ ST students as a proportion of the total engineering students registered for exam<sup>3</sup> is just 3.16% (1066/33751), again indicating the negligible presence of children from socio-economically weaker backgrounds in the most sought after job promising professional courses.

<sup>2</sup> As a social science college teacher this author also finds that the graduate students come with handicaps in English language, are fearful of mathematics and are not trained in reading academic books (other than text books and literature)

<sup>3</sup> Enrolment of engineering students is not given. But students registered for exams is also an indicator of their presence in these institutions.

While the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu made an astute stance on the discriminatory potential of the NEET exam, depriving socio-economically weaker students even the dream of medical education, the avowedly politically conscious state of Kerala, long ago had simply accepted the system of 'merit-based entrance exams without any significant dissent. The results are seen even today.

### *Gender and development*

Women empowerment in the state gives a mixed and paradoxical picture similar to its several other dimensions (like the paradox of high HDI alongside the highest suicides). While the women in the state fared exceptionally well in basic health and education, as indicated by the high sex ratio, longer life expectancy of women and equal or higher participation of women in several levels of education, Kerala is not immune to the serious hurdles in the way of gender justice and equality as pointed out by scholars years before. Women's disadvantage is manifested in crime against women, poor exercise of property rights, low labour market participation, wage discrimination and low participation in the political process. Family interests being given a *must* priority over one's own personal or career interests has aided in the making of the glass ceiling or gender stereotyping of women in certain jobs. Very few women occupy the top leadership posts, be it in politics, business or other careers in Kerala (Devika, 2002; Eapen & Kodoth, 2003).

Tracking the status of women after nearly two decades of these observations, one finds both promising trends and the persistence of certain problematic dimensions. Among the promising developments in the historic step taken by Kerala in 2010 in implementing legislation to reserve 50 per cent of seats for women in local government. In 2021, more than 50% of women-headed local self-governing bodies out of a total of 1200 local bodies (Economic Review 2021). While the achievement is truly laudable and a major milestone, one must be cautious whether the women are truly exercising the leadership power or are dictated by backseat driving by established men in the field. Even if these women leaders are not empowered today, being in the leadership post in a public sphere will likely empower them with genuine leadership capabilities later.

One also finds promising trends in the education of women. The table presents the results.

**TABLE 3.** Trends in the education of women

<i>Category</i>	<i>Percentage of female students</i>
School	48
Higher secondary school	51.82
UG courses in Arts and Sciences	64.6
Post Graduation	64.69
Engineering courses	41.85
M. tech	66.88
Health and allied sciences	81.35
Modern medicine	65.74

Source: Economic Review 2021

The high achievements of women in the school, higher secondary education, UG and PG courses in arts and science colleges have been there for quite some time, but these courses are not considered as immediately employable. Therefore, what is exciting is the increased share of women in 'male bastion professional courses', especially Engineering and M.B.B.S, and women's dominance when it comes to M.Tech. The Economic review indicates that above 60 per cent of doctors will be women in the coming years.

Another promising fact is women's high share in organised sector employment. The table presents the results

**TABLE 4.** Women in the organised sector 2021 (till 31<sup>st</sup> March)

	<i>Public sector</i>	<i>Private sector</i>	<i>Total</i>
Males	65.13%	49.36%	56.39%
Females	34.86%	50.64%	43.6%

Source: Economic Review, 2021

Although the share of males in the organised sector employment is higher, that women do have a substantial share is promising. But inequality indeed exists, as seen by men's much higher share in public sector employment, which is one of the dream jobs of Indian society. One also needs to examine further whether women are substantially employed at the lower end of organised sector jobs.

Among the persisting problems of women's development are their low worker population ratio and low wages. In both cases, the gender inequality is very stark. The table presents the results.

**TABLE 5:** Worker Population ratio and wages

<i>Category</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Worker population ratio in the 15-59 years (2019-20)	79.2	30.5
Average wage earnings per day from casual work April- June 2020	690.09	362.31

Source: Economic Review, 2021

Table shows both workers- labour ratio and wages to be almost half of that of men. That means that despite the high levels of educational achievement, women are missing the final destination of getting a job, most likely due to the crippling gender roles. Further research is needed on whether women's increased participation in professional education has improved the worker-population ratio or are they remaining unemployed even after a professional education. While Kerala has higher wages for both men and women than India, women are stereotyped into low wage-earning jobs. There are not many instances of them collectively bargaining for higher wages in their sectors, resulting in fewer striking disparities in wages. Scholars like Lindberg argue how men's ability to reject underpaid work was done at the cost of women working in unacceptable conditions and how women's issues were not brought as central concerns in the lower class movements of the state (Lindberg, 2001).

There are many more aspects in which women's empowerment has to go a long way, be it the freedom of mobility during the night, being in leadership posts and having a genuine say there, freedom from crimes and getting justice in case of crime and so forth. Equally important is imbibing a feminist perspective that seeks for women's equal treatment in both the private and public sphere and can identify and call out, if not rectify, patriarchy. One finds that in the last two decades or so, there have been 'critical acts'<sup>4</sup> pushing the cause of women empowerment, be it the world-acclaimed calibre of ex- health minister KK Shailaja in dealing with the pandemic, be it women anchors in visual media entering journalism/public intellectual sphere, perceived till then as a male arena and making an impact by asking sharp and difficult questions, be it the case of an actress who reported the rape attempt instead of hiding it, be it the case of association of actresses called Women in Cinema Collective (W.C.C), rightly pointing out patriarchal forces in the film industry, be it the making of poignant films like Great Indian Kitchen, be it in the plethora of feminist writings, not just by well-acclaimed writers but by young students writing in college magazines<sup>5</sup>. Times have changed, and the idea of feminist justice has indeed arrived. But it would take time for such critical acts to turn into

<sup>4</sup> J Devika, discussing the removal of ex-health minister from cabinet in the recent elections notes how 'critical acts', meaning some very distinctive performance by an individual or a few individuals turn out to be game changer than critical mass. To cite an example, women dominate teaching profession in general arts and science colleges, despite this critical mass, there are very few women leaders at the top (<https://thefederal.com/opinion/epims-red-card-for-shailaja-can-set-an-example-for-insecure-masculinity>).

<sup>5</sup> *Kuthivara*, College Magazine, Union Christian College

critical mass, and one should also expect several backlashes and violent counters in the journey forward.

### Conclusion

This paper examined three anxieties of Kerala's development. The first was whether the setback in migration would impact the state's economic growth. This has not been the case so far, as data revealed and is partly to do with Kerala's human development leading to an improvement in the educational qualification of migrants, thus keeping remittances going despite a fall in emigration. On the second question of education, while the state has made sincere efforts to improve the quality of government schools, the tendencies of exclusion of socio-economically weaker sections in terms of getting into coveted professional education remain. One needs to think of focused solutions to address this. On gender justice, while there was progress seen about increased women leadership at the local level and their increased participation in professional education, there is the persistence of issues on women's low labour participation and low wages, to name a few. While the state is indeed seeing progress in feminist ideas in public domains, gender justice, as everywhere else, remains a challenging goal to achieve.

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