

ECONOMY

## The Kerala model: An underrated beacon of inclusive governance

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Nilanjan Banik

When we think of development, we often picture roads, buildings, malls, IT companies, and factories. However, discussions rarely focus on societal progress, human development, or social equity. We've been conditioned to equate development with urbanization.

In the Indian context, many political parties highlight the number of roads constructed and companies attracted. Yet, few speak of the villages equipped with essential facilities that society needs.

This is where Kerala stands out. Consider the story of a farmer named Rajan and his wife, Leela, who live a happy and comfortable life, thanks to Kerala's model of good governance. Their children, Arjun and Meera, have benefited from Kerala's public education system—Arjun is a software engineer, and Meera is a nurse—demonstrating the far-reaching impact of the state's development policies. Rajan and Leela, now in their sixties, receive social pensions from the state, highlighting Kerala's commitment to social security.

But it's not just the social security pensions that support them. Farmers like Rajan benefit from state-provided water, electricity, seeds, and expert services. What brings them the most comfort, however, is the advancement in the public healthcare system, which saves them from the exorbitant fees of private hospitals.

This isn't an isolated story. From Kasargod to Trivandrum, one can witness the human development and social equity that Kerala has been prioritizing for years—what many refer to as the "Kerala Model." It is a model that profoundly impacts human lives.

But what exactly makes it a model? How does a state with a diverse population achieve this? The primary answer lies in its high literacy rate, followed by comprehensive healthcare and robust social welfare schemes. A visit to Calicut, the erstwhile capital of Malabar, offers insight into the quality of education in the state.

In Kerala, it's difficult to distinguish between government schools and private residential schools. The government initiative to introduce public-private-participation in education sector has ensured that government school receive the same facilities as that of private schools. This helped the state to achieve 100 percentage primary education enrollment and ensure that the state has lowest dropout rates in the country.

Kerala has consistently demonstrated that it has one of the best-organized public healthcare systems in place. This system has helped Kerala manage outbreaks of deadly diseases like Nipah and navigate the Covid-19 pandemic, despite challenges in center-state relations. The

widespread public healthcare network and a strong, well-trained group of medical professionals have been critical in these efforts.

The state's extensive network of public health facilities has significantly contributed to reducing infant mortality rates and increasing life expectancy. Kerala leads the country in the highest number of institutional births, and no child suffers from malnutrition. The health system here is a cornerstone of the state's development.

As in the story of Rajan and Leela, people in Kerala are particularly satisfied with the government's social welfare schemes, such as pensions for the elderly and financial aid for women and children. These programs were not created merely for votes; their clear intention is to eradicate poverty and promote social stability. The Kudumbashree initiative is one such example. The Kudumbashree units have helped the states to overcome unemployment in rural areas. The units have provided jobs and played a crucial role in empowering women and improving the quality of life in these communities.

However, the state faces significant financial challenges in executing such an extensive welfare scheme. But this has never deterred the government from continuing these programs, which have helped the state achieve social stability. Kerala has always been proactive with social security measures, prioritizing welfare over mere statistical growth.

The X factor of Kerala is of course its people and the one who leads them. Pinarayi Vijayan, the chief minister, has time and again proved why he is a leader whom people can bank upon. He has faced numerous challenges in his two terms—be it the 2018 floods, the Nipah outbreak, the Covid-19 pandemic, or the Wayanad landslide—he has stood tall with his quick decisions and firm commitment to his people. During the national lockdown, while the opposition criticized his administration, Vijayan focused on ensuring basic amenities for the people, earning their trust and securing a second term in office. It was a clear message from Vijayan to the people: government will stand by them, whatever happens.

However, his tenure has also been marked by many controversies. Many doubted the sustainability of development model of the state of Kerala, especially when there is a potential economic stagnation looming. Opposition and economists have highlighted the growing fiscal deficit and increasing reliance on public borrowing to fund welfare schemes.

Despite these challenges, Vijayan remains a pivotal figure in Kerala's political landscape. Under his leadership, the state has continued its commitment to a development model focused on human welfare, even as it contends with issues of economic management and environmental sustainability.

It was in the recent years; environmental challenges have started threatening its long-term sustainability. The state's reliance on agriculture and its long coastline makes it especially susceptible to climate change, as rising sea levels and erratic weather patterns threaten both livelihoods and infrastructure.

Although Kerala has taken steps to encourage sustainable practices, the effects of climate change remain a major concern, with the potential to hinder the state's progress in other areas. The Wayanad floods of 2024 serve as a stark example of environmental challenges that have overwhelmed both the population and the government.

Despite having a strong disaster management system, the state is often overwhelmed by the recurring flash floods each year. Although AI-based Early Warning systems were implemented in Wayanad, they fell short in predicting the scale of the impending landslides, leaving the government unprepared to handle the crisis.

The central and state governments have been locked in heated debates over the failure of the Early Warning System. The fact remains that climate change is unfolding at an unprecedented rate, and despite proactive efforts, disasters continue to claim lives. Kerala requires more advanced technological solutions to address these challenges, alongside its current community empowerment programs. Instead of criticizing the state's efforts, the Central Government should collaborate with Kerala to enhance this technology.

The Kerala model stands out for its bottom-up approach, built on a partnership between the people and the government. This model thrives on the government's pro-people policies and the progressive mindset of its citizens, resulting in effective governance. Decades of focused efforts in education, healthcare, social justice, and communal harmony have fostered this unique collaboration. Few states exhibit such strong alignment between government initiatives and public support in driving progress, making the Kerala Model a worthy example to follow. Critics who focus only on Kerala's challenges overlook the larger picture—Kerala's story is one of resilience and sustainable development that prioritizes marginalized communities. In a world grappling with income inequality and poverty, the Kerala Model offers an alternative path to shared prosperity.

The need of the hour is to acknowledge this model and support it with the necessary backing from the central government. A healthy center-state relationship benefits all stakeholders. Other Indian states should learn from Vijayan's proactive governance and ensure that their populations feel included in the governance process.