Indian Experiments in Social Democracy: The case of Kerala

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In this essay we study, in some measure in comparison with West Bengal and Scandinavia, the most outstanding experiment in social democracy that India yet has seen: the development experiences in the state of Kerala. Such a description of a state under governments during several periods led by communist parties may give pause to a good many Indian scholars and activists, including good friends, and so it calls for explanation.

Social democracy is a broad framework of ideas and strategies about development based on social justice and the popular politics required to get there. In critique of Kautsky, who claimed that this would come about with an inevitable crisis of capitalism, and syndicalists who focused on union based cooperatives, Lenin contended that enlightened leadership was necessary – while Bernstein for one, refuted them all, arguing for the primacy of democratic politics. The latter thesis turned definitional in the 20th and 21st century thinking of social democracy. Moreover, the idea of equity based development based on democratic politics is certainly not defined by what leaders and parties claim stand for, but by their actual visions and priorities.

In addition to the general definition, it is necessary, therefore, to add some concepts to analyse the actual politics and ideas. In historical perspective, four pillars of social democracy stand out. One, that social democracy is rooted in broad social-interest based and democratic collectivities, in contrast to organisations focusing on the working class only or avant-garde activists. Two, the primacy of democratic linkages between state and society. Liberal democracy is crucial, but also equal citizenship and participation, as well as interest based representation in public governance. Three, the emphasis on what since 1948 is labelled human rights, but also, in particular, citizens equal social rights and rights in working life, along with welfare programmes. Four, the negotiation between capital and labour (but also at times primary producers like small farmers) of social growth pacts, supported by likeminded
governments, about productive labour rights and universal welfare measures as a basis for effective production, and vice versa.

While these pillars are universal, three generations have combine them somewhat differently. The first generation is dominant in the North where it developed in the framework of comprehensive industrialisation and wide alliances for liberal democracy. The second generation included anti- and post-colonial leaders such as Nehru who lost steam with the economically unsuccessful and democratically shallow political shortcuts to progress. The third generation (from about the late 1970s) has in sharp contrast taken the civil and social rights as well as democratisation from below as its point of departure.1

The social democratic promise embedded in the Constitution of India was pursued with inadequate determination by the Nehruvian state. This is also what the Communist Party of India (CPI) sought to achieve, in practice, after the final defeat of its attempts to pursue a violent revolutionary strategy in 1951. The parties have certainly held on to communist principles of leadership and organisation, but their achievements towards greater social justice have been within the framework of India’s democratic polity. According to CPI general secretary Ajoy Ghosh, the aim in Kerala was only to realize the unfulfilled promises of the Congress Party (Bidwai 2015: 205). The record of Kerala, sometimes described as ‘India’s Scandinavia’ (as by Subramanian 2012), is well known. While Dalits, tribals, and fishing communities have often remained marginalised, and the neoliberal growth pattern during recent decades has undermined the Kerala model (George 2011) – even to the extent that the state’s inequality in consumption now has no parallel among Indian states (Oommen 2014: 190) – its poverty elasticity of growth over the period 1958–97 was the most favourable in India (Besley, Burgess and Esteve-Volart 2007). The state stands first in regard to most human development indicators. It has always had the highest level of literacy among the major states, and the quality of health care has generated the highest life expectancy in the country. Moreover, these achievements are largely due to high levels of citizen awareness and participation, through organisation in civil society (Nag 1989). Even though neoliberal informalisation has made strong inroads, some of the legal underpinnings for labour organisation and capital-labour relations still remain in place. The story of the other Indian state where there have been similar attempts, West Bengal, is more problematic in regard to the realization of social democratic objectives. In terms of per capita income, poverty, and human development, West Bengal is an average state (as shown, for example, in the charts accompanying Subramanian’s analysis [2012-1, 2012-2]). The State’s performance in regard to the provision of health care and primary education is dismal. ‘After three decades of left-leaning-rule”,

1 An updated general briefing on ‘Problems and Options of Social Democracy’, is in Crop Poverty Brief, No. 46, 2018, https://www.crop.org/CROPNewsEvents/PROBLEMS-AND-OPTIONS-OF-RENEWING-SOCIAL-DEMOCRACY.aspx
Kohli says, ‘the high levels of poverty and low levels of human development in the state are a real blot on the left’s record’ (2012: 193). Yet poverty has declined from initially very high levels, according to both Besley et al. (2007), who found the state’s poverty elasticity of growth to be second only to that of Kerala, and Ravi and Mahendra Dev (2007), who found that West Bengal had the best record of all in regard to the rate of poverty reduction. Kohli’s argument that ‘this decline in poverty is a result of deliberate redistribution and robust economic growth in the context of good governance, tell-tale signs of social democratic politics at the helm’ (2012: 195) can be criticised for special pleading but the idea of a social democratic orientation is justified as far as outcome is concerned.

Overcoming diversity and extreme inequalities

Most scholarship on the comparative history of social democratic development draws attention to the importance of the relative cultural homogeneity and socio-economic equality, as was the case in Scandinavia. In view of Kerala’s religious diversity and historically extreme caste and feudal systems, the emergence of its social democratic development is thus a puzzle. However, Kerala’s different religious communities (about 60% Hindus, 20% Muslims and 20% Christians) have been able to live side by side and cooperate in vital aspects of public life through what M.G.S. Narayanan (1972) labelled a ‘cultural symbiosis’, which Gurukkal (1987) later explained in terms of economic interdependence. Further, Kerala’s system of caste differentiation, the most rigid and elaborate in the whole of India, was confronted by social reform movements in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin and anti-feudal struggle in British-governed Malabar from the mid-19th century.

The reform movements were remarkably similar to the liberal educational, religious, and temperance movements of Scandinavia at about the same time. The Kerala movements evolved in Travancore in the 19th century and later in Cochin. Christian mission activity encouraged a sense of their self-worth among historically subordinated, oppressed and marginalised people (Singh 2011: 290). Governments that feared the lower castes’ turn to the missionaries, themselves engaged in education (Jeffrey 1976: 81). More importantly, according to Michael Tharakan (1984, 1998), already in the early 19th century, various reform movements put forward competitive demands for basic education, in conjunction with the commercialisation of an economy that included many small landholdings, not only plantations. This was because the princes of Travancore and Cochin fostered agricultural development via giving rights to the tenants to counter the powers of upper caste Nayar aristocrats and large landowners. The social pacts between the princes and these tenants recall the way in which the Swedish kings linked up at times with peasant proprietors, and leaseholders on state land, against the landlords. The pacts in Kerala fostered more inclusive economic growth in commercial agriculture, which in turn called for educated people in the expanding services, trade, and the colonial and princely bureaucracies, as well as for basic literacy among the increasing numbers of smallholders who engaged in the cultivation of tapioca, coconuts and, rubber along with coffee and spices (Tharakan 2006). These are the roots of
Kerala’s celebrated civil society. In addition, social reformers from among the higher castes and non-Hindu communities like the Syrian Christians worked to bring about change in their own communities.

**The rise of social democracy**

From the 1930s, the anti-feudal struggles in Malabar and major parts of the reform movements in Travancore and Cochin came together under socialist and later on communist movements for class-based civil and social rights, anti-imperialism, and a linguistically unified state of Kerala. According to Prerna Singh (2011, 2015), subnationalism was particularly important in bringing together under-represented groups against the non-Malayali Brahmans. These processes have some similarities with rise in the same period of social democratic development in Scandinavia, but the conditions were of course different. So, how could the Kerala combination of bourgeois development and socio-religious reform movements take a social democratic turn?

According to Robin Jeffrey, one factor was the combined effect of the reduction of the disabilities imposed on the low castes and the collapse of the matrilineal kinship system. Together, these brought about social disintegration and, as he says, ‘Marxism … came to fill an ideological void keenly felt by thousands of literate people’ (1976: 78).

Leaders of several movements found common cause in the Congress Socialist Party, founded in 1934 as part of the mass movement orchestrated by the Congress. Although no top level leaders emerged from the subordinated *Pulaya* community, several leaders of reforming caste organisations, such as the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam of the low ranked *Ezhava*, turned to politics. Some of these eventually became important communists, most prominently Mrs K. R. Gauri and V. S. Achutanandan. Others had a background in privileged Christian or Hindu reform movements, notably E.M.S. Namboodiripad – later one of India’s finest communist leaders – who as a student had been a member of the reform organisation of the Namboodiri Brahmans. They ‘embedded’ themselves in wider popular struggles that spurred left wing parties, including the Kerala section of the Indian Communist Party, which with additional leaders such as A. K. Gopalan and P. Krishna Pillai.

A second factor that contributed to Kerala’s social democratic evolution, according to E.M.S. himself, is that ‘the caste organisations in Kerala pioneered the mobilisations of the peasantry against the prevailing social order which was extremely oppressive to poor people’ (quoted in Nag 1989: 420). This was because of the shift by the turn of the century from the subordinated communities’ competitive demands for education and government jobs to more mass-based organisations’ demand for a wider variety of rights and services for broader sections of the population (Tharakan 1998, 2006, and 2011). For example, radical leaders of the low ranked Ezhava caste linked up in the early 1930s with Muslim and Christian organisations to demand equal rights and opportunities for members of all these disparate groups (Arnold et al. 1976: 356).
Third, in Kerala as in Scandinavia, the major transformations of popular political priorities and organisation occurred in response to, first, the world economic crisis of the early 1930s. The struggle for civil and social inclusion and equality, which had so far been framed by special caste and religious demands, through the reform movements and in the context of commercial agriculture, was now combined with the increasingly important class differences and demands made by popular interest based movements. Second, the relative absence of class distinctions within the lowest caste groups meant that some caste movements for social reform could be politicised on class lines (Desai 2001). This was especially important with regard to the subordinated Pulaya caste of often bonded agricultural workers, whose own reform movements had not been very successful due to their limited resources and weak leadership. Similarly, the growing importance of class interests among the Ezhavas, within coconut production and toddy tapping and with little land of their own, could also not be handled within their own reform movement. Hence, many linked up with socialist and communist movements. The same applied to workers in the coir and cashew factories. Even some of the better off Ezhavas, who wanted stronger action against the persisting discrimination that they experienced, followed suit.

Finally, the demand for land reform brought together different groups such as peasants in Malabar, who fought unreformed feudalism, and agricultural labourers as well as many tenants, toddy tappers, and coir and cashew industry workers in Travancore and Cochin, who struggled for redistributive justice against evictions and for decent wages and employment conditions. In Kerala, therefore, as Patrick Heller puts it, ‘The struggle against British imperialism became a struggle against the social and economic power of [the] landed upper caste agrarian elites. From the outset of mass politics, democratic rights in Kerala were about social rights’ – whereas elsewhere in the country it was generally the case that ‘the dominant nationalist Congress party politics … sought to accommodate rural elites and downplayed class and redistributive issues’ (2005: 85)

Electoral success, impractical strategy, and undemocratic adversaries

The Kerala communists shared in the vicissitudes of the Communist Party of India through the war years and into the period between 1946 and 1951, when the Party pursued a trade-union-based revolutionary line, with roots in Bombay and Bengal, in addition to the agrarian revolt in Telengana. This was ruthlessly crushed by the Congress-led government. But many Kerala communists and a number of socialist intellectuals and trade union leaders retained their popular influence. The socialists formed parties too, played a part in the new post-independence government of Travancore and Cochin, and still hold influence in some pockets of Kerala. But the communists’ organisation was much more effective, partly by holding on to Stalinist forms of ‘democratic centralism’. So the broad popular

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2 By contrast, poor sections of the Syrian Christians had stronger landed roots. Several of them migrated to Malabar and typically became opponents of land reform.
movements survived within the context of the struggle for a unified Kerala; the new communist
priorities from the early 1950s, of working within India’s democracy with a credible strategy for how
to foster social democratic development (to which we shall return), was unmatched by any other
parties and made it possible for the Left to win office in the state’s first elections, in 1957.

The broad and increasingly class-oriented alliances of social movements, along with parties rooted in
them, that had paved the way for the broad based struggle for social democratic development and
electoral victory, recall several aspects of the fledgling labour movement in Scandinavia and its
alliances with agrarian movements and parties during the first part of the century. It was impossible in
Kerala, however, to proceed by introducing anything comparable with the Scandinavian growth pact
between capital and labour. Industrialisation was lagging behind and, even though there were
relatively strong business groups and unions, unevenly developed production and trade came with
diverse interests and insufficiently unified organisations. It might have been possible to advance on the
initial basis of Kerala’s own comparative advantages of high levels of education and export of
agricultural products – as happened, for example, in Mauritius and Costa Rica (Sandbrook et al. 2007).
But the communists’ initially successful strategy of ‘unity and struggle’ with the Congress, in line with
Moscow’s recommendations, implied compliance with the national government’s development
strategy of import substitution and heavy industries. The Kerala government tried instead to adjust to
the local conditions by way of a growth pact among labour, peasants, farmers, and industrialists, based
on land reform and investments in inclusive, state regulated education, along with other social rights
and policies. Land reform and more inclusive education were expected to increase production and
incomes, strengthen democracy, and serve as a basis for industrialisation. But even though the land
reform was cautiously designed in line with the Congress party’s own policy recommendations from
1949 (Bidwai 2015: 206), it was resisted by all possible legal and political means by most of the larger
landholders, perhaps especially from within the Syrian Christian community. Moreover, the emphasis
on more inclusive state-led education for the benefit of underprivileged sections of the population was
equally contentious, given that it would affect the privileges of many powerful groups and their state-
supported educational institutions. The opposition came together in an anti-communist ‘liberation
struggle’, supported by the United States. In 1959, the central government under Nehru imposed
presidential rule; this decision was influenced by Indira Gandhi in her role as chair of the Congress
Party (Jeffrey 1991; Bidwai 2015: 209 ff.)

From movement based politics to party-clientelism and insufficiently productive welfarism

There is no doubt about the relative success of the leftists in Kerala, who were in power from 1957
these periods, social democratic oriented reforms were introduced and, remarkably, the major
advances were not entirely undone when the Left was out of office. The results depended substantially
on the strong legacy of basic social and economic reforms in Kerala and the intense electoral competition between leftist and more conservative parties, which made both leftists and rightists sensitive to popular scrutiny and priorities. The expansion of Mother and Child Health Centres, for instance, continued because all parties knew that people wanted them. Many other welfare reforms were introduced and kept alive over the years: unemployment relief, pensions for agricultural and other workers as well as for widows, subsidised housing, public distribution with subsidised prices of essential food, meals in schools and preschools, minimum wages, and more. The extent of political awareness (encouraged by widespread newspaper reading) and of associational activism were critical factors, in Moni Nag’s view, in explaining the better access to and use of health facilities in rural Kerala, by comparison with West Bengal (Nag 1983, 1989).

In spite of these advances, however, and from the point of view of the four dimensions that we believe are crucial in the politics of social democratic development, the leftist political and interest organisations actually disintegrated during their scattered periods in power between 1967 and 1981. The United Front strategies were no longer driven by clear cut socio-economic interests and popular demands from below for specific policies, or by the idea of facilitating agreements between employers and trade unions – such as might have fostered growth and equity. Left-led coalition governments rested instead on compromises within the elite between the special interests of the various parties and their leaders. This process generated corruption as well as divisiveness. The larger Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), formed as a result of the split in the communist movement in 1964, retained most of the organised popular base and used it to confront their rivals at the polls, while the Communist Party of India (CPI) linked up with the Congress party and even supported the all-India state of Emergency. Various parties in coalition governments used perks to foster membership and separate interest organisations among small farmers, tenants, agricultural labourers, labourers in the informal sectors and industry, as well as workers and white collar workers in the public sectors, in addition to women’s and youth organisations and cooperative associations and cultural and educational groups. Increasingly, many independent civil society associations, too, came closer to influential politicians and parties. The special interests of the various groups, both leaders and followers, were often given priority rather than unifying state policies and rights for all, regardless of organisational affiliation. Possibly worse, the benefits and welfare measures were chosen irrespective of their effect on economic development – which stagnated. There were similar problems with regard to state-civil society relations beyond the parliamentary electoral system. In Kerala, as in Scandinavia, participation of different interest groups in policymaking and implementation had evolved on the basis of decades of social and political struggle. But in contrast with Scandinavia, where this struggle was rooted in pre-industrial representation of various interests, and where it was democratised by liberal associations and the labour movement, Kerala’s state-society relations beyond elections were increasingly dominated by parties and individual politicians and bureaucrats. That said, this took place
through networks of politically dependent organisations and leaders, rather than by means of populist appeals such as in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. And Kerala was less dominated by a single hegemonic political party than was West Bengal. So in spite of the negative effects of party-clientelism, the Kerala communists have had to consider various interests and have thus retained a substantial following (Heller 2013).

These disparate interests among the Left’s following affected economic development, too. Land reforms were finally realised in the 1970s, but these, as well as the remarkable advances within health and education, did not include the weakest sections of the population and did not foster alternative inclusive development to the extent that was expected. The reforms did away with landlordism but mainly benefitted the tenants, who often developed special interests of their own. Moreover, there were many exemptions: tillers were granted rights only to their huts and small plots on generally infertile land, and tribal people and the fishing communities were completely outside the reforms. Most importantly, perhaps, the reforms were not followed up with measures to foster production. Many new owners developed interests in less labour-intensive crops and even engaged in land speculation. In addition, the reforms were implemented during a period of conflict between the CPI and CPI-M (in sharp contrast with the tenancy reforms in West Bengal some ten years later), neither of which had elected representation at the local level (see Raj and Tharakan 1983, Herring 1989, Franke 1992, and Törnquist 1991 and 1995). Better educated, privileged groups could develop new and profitable ventures and secure good jobs outside agriculture, and the former tenants from lower ranked communities gained education and land thanks to the reforms and welfare measures. But neither group developed agricultural and other production activities of the kind that would generate new and better jobs for the underprivileged sections of the population – which remained marginalised, even if they now had the ability to read and write and enjoyed some access to health services. Meanwhile, many investors avoided Kerala, claiming it was difficult to cooperate with its strong trade unions. And, from the mid-1970s, increasingly many better educated and trained Keralites and their families sustained or improved their standard of living by way of employment as migrant workers in the Gulf countries in particular.

**Attempts at renewing the ‘Kerala model’**

Efforts were made to break out of these dynamics during the 1987–91 Left Front Government under E. K. Nayanar, in which there was no participation of caste and community based parties. Several innovative policies such as decentralisation and cooperation towards improved rice production were initiated; left-oriented civil society groups, especially the People’s Science Movement (KSSP) with its tens of thousands of members (many in educational institutions in rural and semi-rural areas) initiated a number of campaigns for full literacy, more democratic and socially inclusive education, and local development plans. There was a stumbling block, however, in scaling up these civil society initiatives.
to more universal local movements and policies, given that the government was not yet capable and partly also not willing to decentralise politics and administration (Törnquist 1995). So when the Left Front lost the elections in 1991, campaigners began prioritising democratic decentralisation and planning from below. For this, they won support from concerned scholars, some mass based interest organisations, and most importantly from the widely respected communist leader, E.M.S. Namboodiripad. During the next Left Front government, between 1996 and 2001, new initiatives moved ahead through the State Planning Board and the now well-known ‘People’s Planning Campaign’ (PPC). This was in spite of stiff resistance, not only from the Congress-led political front, but also from within the Left Front itself and on the parts of several of the related unions and other organisations, which held on to rigid conceptions of class politics and ‘democratic centralism’.

Essentially, the PPC was based on the distribution of more than one third of the planning (investment) budget to the local governments – on the condition that they developed proposals through participatory planning to be facilitated by well-trained resource persons and guided by a comprehensive set of rules and advice. In terms of the four dimensions of social democratic development that we focus on in this book, the PPC was innovative. The missing growth coalitions between state-level organised capital, labour, and farmers, combined with social provisioning as in Scandinavia, were now to be fostered on the basis of local negotiations between government, labour, and employers within the framework of participatory development institutions. Conventional unions and employers’ organisations were expected to take part, but special space was also provided for wider participation from informal workers and the self-employed. Social and economic compromises would be facilitated by way of democratically prioritised investments (via the planning budget) in publicly approved projects, as well as distributive welfare measures and special schemes to foster equal rights for all, including for Dalits and women.3 Social rights and welfare policies would thus be of immediate value for a majority of the population as well as serving as a basis for economic development.

Moreover, with regard to political collectivities and state society relations, the divisive party and related interest group politicisation, which had evolved from the mid-1960s in particular, would be countered not by neoliberal market and civil society measures, as suggested by the World Bank, but by democratic fora for participation, along a long chain of popular sovereignty from neighbourhoods to representative groups and committees at higher levels.4 These channels of supplementary democratic participation were expected to undermine divisive lobbying by different interest groups. The same channels of participation were also to keep politicians, bureaucrats, and related contractors

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3 The focus on women, after some time, was particularly pioneering in politically radical but socially conservative Kerala.
4 There was thus a similar kind of three-way dynamic between central (here at the state level) and local government, and civil society, to that identified by Judith Tendler in her analysis of successful governance of development in Ceara in Northeast Brazil (Tendler 1997).
accountable, thus curbing corruption. In contrast to Scandinavian social corporatism, which could not be applied in Kerala (given weak industrialisation with fragmented unions and employers’ organisations, in addition to ‘soft’ public administration), the organisational basis was, thus, democratic decentralisation with a number of new, supplementary, participatory institutions. This has recently been stressed on a general level by Heller (2013). In the Scandinavian setting, as shown by Hilde Sandvik (2016), Heller’s argument brings to mind two of the bases for the welfare state: the absence of strong guilds and the importance of the pre-democratic parish community meetings among all property owners and leaseholders of public land. Based on local taxation, these attended to, for instance, poor relief and development. But later on, they were unable to handle the new interests and challenges associated with the rise and development of capitalist industrialisation during the 19th century, and the huge numbers of people who could no longer make ends meet.

Initially the PPC was quite successful, but faced after some time a number of stumbling blocks that prevented substantial political and economic transformation. There were five major problems. One was insufficient linkage between measures in favour of social security and the promotion of production on the basis of Kerala’s comparative advantages, including commercial agriculture and sectors drawing on the state’s relatively high quality education services. Second, there were unresolved problems in regard to the relations of liberal-representative democracy and direct democracy in the policy process, which ideally would have been tackled through discussion with progressive administrators, politicians, and scholars. As recently reemphasised by K. N. Harilal (2014), blurred lines of responsibility and representation undermined deliberation between vital partners in social democratic development, generating distrust among them, as well as abuse of funds. A related third problem was the want of a viable strategy for involving the ‘conventional’ interest and issue based organisations among farmers, labourers, and industrial workers, related to the mainstream Left, in new plans and priorities. Fourth, it was particularly difficult to engage middle classes given that welfare and production measures were targeted rather than universal. As is well known from other efforts at social democratic development, the involvement of sections of the middle class is crucial for gaining majorities and generating broader interests in the welfare state. Even many young people with middle class aspirations lost interest in the campaign. Fifth, sections within the major left party (the CPI-M) and the Left Front made attempts to take over and benefit from the PPC, while others refused to support leading local campaigners as candidates in elections and slandered and isolated major PPC leaders. As a result, PPC was further weakened and it was possible for the new Congress-led government to radically alter the campaign when the Left Front lost local elections in 2000 and state elections in 2001.

Stagnation of the Left and the rise of neoliberalism
The efforts of civil society activists together with leftist political reformists from 1987 until 2001 to bring about change were impressive; there is now more space for local democratic action and a few pioneering schemes remain (such as productive ventures among poor women at the neighbourhood level). But the campaigners did not succeed in generating a new democratic formula for the combination of equity and growth. Already, from the 1990s, the increasing rates of economic growth in Kerala were more related to the liberalisation of the Indian economy. Increasingly, Kerala’s ‘wealth’ was sustained by the extensive remittances from the now more than two and a half million migrant labourers, primarily in the Gulf countries. The common estimate is that they send back about US$ 13 billion per year, equivalent to more than a third of Kerala’s GDP. The competitive power of Keralites in international markets rests on previous struggles for civil and social rights and public investments in education, but it is certainly not the underprivileged and poorly educated people who are competitive in these job markets. Moreover, in spite of this inflow of cash, the current growth rate (of around eight per cent) is only on a par with the other high performing Indian states. The remittances have not been well used to foster Kerala’s own welfare system and its economic development. Rather have they mainly been used for consumption, house construction, and investments in property and the service sector, often generating more imports, speculation, environmental destruction, and greater inequality. So, although the unemployment problem has been reduced (the current more or less reliable figure is about seven per cent), about the same number of low paid north Indian labourers have moved south to take the construction and service sectors in Kerala as have Keralites become well paid emigrants to other countries.

Even though the State Planning Board has announced a long term plan (produced externally by a New Delhi think tank) with the aim of taking the state in the direction of a Nordic model, there is, thus, little semblance of social democratic development in the actual transformation of Kerala during the recent decades. In addition to the growing inequalities and reduction of earlier efforts at building a welfare state, business is well organised and influential, but factionalised. The rapidly expanding new middle classes have few expectations of the state; finding it inefficient and corrupt, they mainly opt for individual solutions to precarity, in addition to family and community solidarities. While sections of the old middle classes that were crucial partners in the historical achievements may still be interested in defending the remnants of the welfare state, the most vulnerable people, in between one-fourth and one-third of the population, including the adivasis, Dalits and workers in the old informal sectors, agriculture and industries, are badly affected and have little bargaining power. The trade unions are mainly defensive and rarely present in the new dynamic private sectors of the economy, which typically have informal employment relations. It may now only be the Self Employed Women’s

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Association (SEWA) which does some organising among informal labour. Kerala unions made almost no effort to work among the large numbers of poorly paid migrant labourers from other parts of India, though there are some reports of scattered efforts by unions from outside Kerala. The growing problems with insecure employment relations and the need to arrange social security have not (yet?) generated the renewed interest in public welfare systems that has come about in Latin America, Indonesia, and East Asia. The various parts of the Left would certainly like to alter this situation, but the priorities remain unclear. Meanwhile some from the vulnerable sections of the population are abandoning the Left and returning to communal solidarities; the BJP is making inroads, including among Ezhavas.

This does not mean that there are no protests on the parts of hard hit people in Kerala. Many adivasis agitate for land, some fisher folk claim basic rights, and numerous people resist dispossession and environmental degradation of their land and neighbourhoods. But these actions tend to be scattered; even if some support is coming from various political parties and civil society, the outcome is rarely positive. There is certainly new activism in civil society, including campaigns by KSSP against the high prices paid for medicines by ordinary people. And there are also protests against corruption as well as moral policing by conservative Hindu and Muslim communities. But coordination beyond what is possible through commercial and new social media is poor.

Several of the critical factors involved in the recent transformations and efforts at change in Kerala relate to the linkages between state and society. Confidence in public governance is low and the Congress-led government that entered office in 2011 was particularly ridden by corruption. Critique against this mismanagement and the abuse of power was the major factor behind the recent return to power of the Left in the 2016 state elections. There are also popular attempts at organic cultivation and supporting pioneering local government efforts to clean up cities. But the main linkages between state and society remain personal, via lobbying the equally mistrusted parties and leaders; while personal networks and clientelism are characteristic of the non-left parties, the CPI-M in particular is far better organised they are also affected by centralised and a culture of loyalty and obligation in return for favour. In short, while spontaneous protests, civil society organising, and social movements remain frequent in Kerala, their room of manoeuvre is constrained. So in spite of some rethinking of the problems of combining representative and participatory governance (Harilal 2014), not much has changed with regard to the persistent dominance of parties and politicians when people try to come together and take their problems to local government. This applies even to self-help and residential groups and town hall meetings. Political organisation and leadership are certainly not a problem as such, as long as vested interests of the parties and leaders are kept at bay, including in the wake of local and state elections. But in view of Scandinavian and other cases of social democratic development there is an obvious need for institutionalised channels of autonomous representation in government of significant interest and issue organisations. This is not to undermine the parties,
parliaments and executive administration, but necessary if vested party interests as well as clientelism are to be countered, and to foster trust in impartial public welfare and other services. In other contexts, similar efforts have been spurred by the need to handle unavoidable tasks such as reducing fuel subsidies in favour of more investment in welfare policies and more promotion of inclusive production. In Kerala, an analogous issue might be the need to change tax laws so as to reduce incentives for speculation in land and other forms of property, and to fund welfare reforms that support production. While local government institutions are now in place, they remain weak and little happens without the intervention of members of legislative assembly (MLAs) and state level ministers. Quite against the spirit of democratic local governance, even ‘pork barrel funds’ (enabling individual members of the state legislature to spend money for development in their electoral constituencies) are now in place.

In spite of all this, a catastrophe for the Left comparable with that in West Bengal is unlikely in Kerala, given the communists’ historically more solid roots in popular movements and organisations, and the stiff competition between parties and political fronts which is supported by Kerala’s more vibrant media. The left parties remain relatively less corrupt than their competitors, there is no viable leftist alternative within the present electoral system, and the leftists uphold a general vision of the need to defend the interests of the weak in society. Finally, there seems to be a growing opinion within the Left of the need to combine efforts to defend the least well-off with industrial and other development projects, and a response to the aspirations of the middle classes. Efforts were made on part of the mainstream Left in face of the 2016 state elections to discuss an alternative view of how to foster equity and growth under the new neoliberal conditions, but contours are blurred. A social democratic orientation implies good organisation of the most crucial actors, and democratic channels (in addition to the much too dominant parties) in order both to revive the welfare state and to bring about more inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic development. Kerala has essentially bypassed the stage of industrial development (that never really was achieved in the 1950s and onwards) in favour of post-industrial activities. The state has little of the Global North’s broad labour movement and production-oriented class of employers that demonstrated themselves to be capable of negotiating social pacts that allowed for the combination of growth and welfare, facilitated by the government. As a result, Kerala needs to negotiate the current phase of rapid uneven development that, if left unchecked, threatens to dispossess the weakest sections of the population of their land, livelihood, and housing without providing decent alternatives. Many workers and middle classes may also benefit from a new pattern of development. The relevant historical experiences from Scandinavia are mainly limited to the agreements between the labour movement, the farmers and the rural poor on negotiating primitive accumulation by combining universal welfare and protection for viable agriculture with economic growth and more jobs in modern sectors. Some of this may be relevant in the rural settings of Kerala too, but the urban problems of environmental destruction and speculation
are equally challenging and call for new solutions. In the similar context of Indonesia, even the election of the new president rested largely on his proven capacity to address these problems by negotiating urban development and liveable cities between business, middle classes, labour, and the urban poor (Djani et al. 2016).

**New Kerala roadmap?**

Even though a new Left Front government (2006-2011) combatted corruption and defended petty producers and the poor, there were disputes about priorities and no dynamic alternative to neoliberalisation. The once so crucial interest organisations deteriorated. Their presence is particularly poor (or non-existing) within the new sectors such as tourism and technology as well as among informal labour (including adivasis and dalits); and the many incoming migrants from the north taking jobs in low paid sectors as Keralites have taken up better paid jobs elsewhere. Congress-led governments tried to foster modern industry and infrastructure, such as in Cochin-Ernakulum, but suffered from poor coordination of factionalised business in addition to extensive corruption.

The new Left Front government from 2016 is more unified behind combined efforts at reinvigorating, on the one hand, public health, education and small-scale local development initiatives in the interest of the less well-off people in particular, with, on the other hand, industrial and other modern development projects, thus responding to the aspirations of the educated middle classes as well. In view of similar ambitions elsewhere, such as during the United Progressive Alliance in Delhi (2004-2014), the Aquino III government in the Philippines (2010-2016) and the more likeminded regimes in South Africa past the fall of apartheid and in Brazil under the Labour Party (PT), however, there are obvious challenges involved in combining liberal economic growth in the global context and welfare measures in its backyards.

These common obstacles are not confined to insufficient productive investments and impartial administration of revenues during the commodity boom, such as in Brazil (and even worse, of course, in Venezuela), or for that matter of remittances in Kerala. In addition, the welfare measures have often been limited to handouts for the poor. There is a good case for the idea of a basic universal income.

But only as a complement not as a substitute for collective action for social democratic transformative reforms generating good jobs (including in welfare sectors) and fostering both ordinary people’s wellbeing and bargaining power as well as their health, skills and other factors that are crucial for inclusive and more competitive production. Some synergies between welfare reforms and growth can certainly be designed by authoritarian states, as in East Asia. But even if we prefer less dictatorship, it must also be acknowledged that democratic negotiations and agreements between capital and labour and other parties involved, as historically in Scandinavia, presupposed powerful democratic interest organisations, and, of course, a supportive government. In spite of an otherwise unusually broad labour movement, South Africa suffers from poor organisation and representation of informal labour,
the absolute majority of the population. In countries where organisation has been even weaker, a common shortcut has been the mobilisation of counter movements behind reformist populist leaders such as Jokowi in Indonesia against various neo-liberal drawbacks, followed by their supposedly direct-democratic governance in co-operation with ‘friendly’ movements and associations. Typically, however, there have been more populist mobilisations against neo-liberalism than in favour of well-designed and anchored strategic reforms. This, in addition to insufficient interest organisation and representation, have opened up for right wing nationalists to employ similar populist methods in hijacking sections of the counter movements. Like in Duterte’s The Philippines, Bolsonaro’s Brazil and in the undermining of President Jokowi’s reform agenda in Indonesia.

Contexts differ, but several of the challenges are similar in Kerala. Revenues are insufficient and private resources among investors as well as migrants must be mobilised in partially risky ways to sustain welfare – including for sections of the population like the Ezhava community that might be approached by right wing nationalists trying to use issues like Sabarimala to foster politics based on caste- and religion rather than interest- and equal rights. The recent environmental disaster has added to the problems. What should be done? The participatory local planning was too difficult to scale up. The Planning Board (or for that matter a party or certain ministers) cannot substitute for authoritarian developmental states in designing and enforcing comprehensive plans inclusive of both state and private priorities. There are insufficiently broad and coherent professional associations and interest based organisations among labourers as well as employers-cum-investors to negotiate the combination of productive welfare reforms and investments.

Yet, Kerala, it seems to me in comparative perspective, might have the potential capacity to handle the blocks which likeminded partners elsewhere have stumbled over. Firstly, Kerala can benefit from the historical legacy of two periods of pioneering and successful formation of broad democratic alliances by combining citizen rights and interest based politics. There will be no repetition of the Left’s disaster in West Bengal. Second, Kerala is blessed by a quite widely accepted emphasis on equal citizen rights (at least beyond the quite widely defined private-cum-family sphere, which is especially unfortunate for women). This includes principles of active and independent citizens as well as democratic direct linkages between state and society via parties and interest and citizen organisations – in contrast to mediation via communal organisations and their strongmen. The right wing nationalists may not be able to ‘make another Tripura’. Third, Kerala’s recent efforts at equity and growth have not been dependent on an unreliable commodity boom, which elsewhere has nourished primitive accumulation and corruption along with landlords and oligarchs. Kerala may rather benefit from having uprooted landlordism and from having fostered more sustainable and potentially productive
public health and, in particular, education, which is more difficult to monopolise, plus tourism, which may be regulated.\(^6\)

The prime potential in Kerala, it seems to me, is, thus, the capacity to nourish the historical experiences and lessons in promoting sustainable and inclusive development based on knowledge. Inclusiveness, however, calls for welfare reforms and investments in education. The investments in education must be attractive, then, for both middle classes and for increasingly many by now less privileged Keralites that must also be brought into education-based production and services, within the state as well as in consultancies outside the state. Revenues and investments, moreover, call for cooperation with many private actors, from migrant workers to entrepreneurs. And both requirements cannot be dictated but must be negotiated.

Given Kerala’s history of democracy and popular participation, it would be a contradiction of sorts if such negotiations were to rest with individuals within the government and the leading party. Overseeing committees of noted experts are fine, but they are more about technocratic governance than democratic oriented negotiations. And while the planning board may play an active role in suggesting transformative productive reforms that many actors would be able to unite behind, it is beyond its current mandate and capacity to negotiate comprehensive plans that involve both public, cooperative and private actors. It would be premature of me to suggest how such negotiations (and democratic representation in them) could be facilitated in an alternative way, but probably it is the lynchpin.

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\(^6\) Within brackets, this potential is also relevant in Cuba, though it is hampered by insufficient citizen democratic rights.


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Bio

Olle Törnquist is senior Professor of Political Science and Development Research, University of Oslo. He has written widely since the 1970s on comparative radical politics and democracy, especially in Indonesia, parts of India and the Philippines, and in Scandinavia. Most of his writings is available at http://folk.uio.no/ollet/