

# Inclusive 'Kerala Model': Challenges

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**T**he state and society of Kerala continue to evince multiple social complexities notwithstanding the much-touted feats in human development. One of the critical challenges of this complexity is the phenomenon of social exclusion, and it still remains problematic for the social and political forces in the state—particularly in the context of renegotiating for an egalitarian public discourse. The ideological sway of religious and socio-political organisations, which have a significant impact on the polity and society of Kerala, is a crucial factor to be reckoned with. Even as major sections of the upper caste communities, affluent classes, and socially and economically forward communities have achieved progress in diverse areas of social life, the marginalised communities continued to be beleaguered by the perennial exclusion phenomenon in the state.

In spite of several robust programmes and plans introduced by the successive governments, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Dalit and Adivasi communities) experience extreme levels of exclusion. In various human development parameters—like proper education, adequate healthcare and access to regular, salaried jobs—people from the Dalit and Adivasi communities are often facing multiple challenges. In the job sector, for example, they are abysmally underrepresented, and affirmative action policies are apparently not quite successful. Even though only a negligible number of households in the state practice open defecation, it is still prevalent among a large number of Dalit and Adivasi communities, especially in the rural and hilly areas. For them, scarcity of drinking water, lack of sanitation and poor water sources are their lived-realities which they fight every day in order to survive.

Admittedly, Kerala stands out, among the Indian states, for the progress it achieved on different fronts such as gender equality and development. Women are surely better educated, healthier and enjoy substantial freedom and mobility in comparison to women in other states. Kerala has made significant progress in ensuring public healthcare and quality education. Educational attainment and learning levels are among the highest in the country, while infant mortality and open defecation are among the lowest. However, female participation in the labour force is low and declining. Also there exist striking differences in the opportunities available to women belonging to different classes and castes. The nutrition levels of lower-income families remain low and this has been very acute in places like Attappady and other Adivasi hamlets.

### Challenges to 'Inclusive' Strategy

Financial inclusion is a buzzword in the current discourses of social inclusion. It means the delivery of banking and other financial services at affordable costs to the vast sections of disadvantaged and low-income groups. However, unrestrained access to public goods and services is also essential for an open, inclusive and dynamic society. It is a significant step in moulding an egalitarian system. A major challenge is how to address the problems of conceptualising 'social exclusion' and developing a workable meaning for it. Another problem is how to identify who the 'socially excluded' are in the context of Kerala, and how to determine what could serve as the basis of 'social inclusion.' Apart from the economic aspects of social inclusion, the politics of polarisation, marginalisation and developmental disparity are the key themes to be considered.

Mere visualisation of economic status and its comparisons will not give a proper solution-setting for social inclusion, which is more nuanced and interlinked with other critical factors. It involves specific concerns related to religion, caste, social position, among others. Do we address these vital questions concerning the current situation of Kerala and understand how the idea of exclusion is active in the social milieu? It certainly calls for a closer

examination of the unfolding scenario and how the society responds to those issues.

The idea of 'alienation' has been relevant in comprehending the complexities of social structure. The people who get alienated and socially excluded from the mainstream started representing themselves through different modes of expression and thereby developed strategies for effective interventions in different areas which led to the emergence of new strands of study and critical analysis that engaged with hitherto unacknowledged dimensions of their existence and history. Policymakers thus began to look at the concept of social exclusion by studying the reasons behind marginalisation and unequal development, with a focus on foregrounding the historic specificity of the Global South. Social alienation is now understood and studied from the vantage points of anthropology and demographics, using the frameworks and methods offered by respective disciplines. The definitions of social exclusion are overlapping, and often the primary focus is on economic inequality and money distribution. Beyond economic variation and money value, there are obviously other factors at stake here.

First, and most importantly, theorists stress on the *multidimensional* nature of social exclusion. Social exclusion, they argue, relates not merely to a lack of material resources, but also matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of social power. In other words, the idea of social exclusion attempts to capture the complexity of *powerlessness* in modern society rather than focusing on one of its outcomes. According to Duff (1995), "Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterisations alienation and distance from mainstream society." In his studies on the development of modern institutions of emerging liberal societies, Michel Foucault devoted considerable amount of attention to the modern history of exclusion. Foucault begins his analysis based on the complex couplet and binary of 'exclusion/ inclusion', rather more a horizontal segmentalisation that intimates spatial metaphors detailing marginalisation, segregation, confinement and scientification or the production of scientific objectivity

through architectures of the gaze, including the model of the ‘panopticon’ (Peters and Besley 2014). Through his writing, Foucault (2006) stressed on the idea of exclusion and demonstrated the mode of its operation in a society. Thus, there are theories that deploy different notions about exclusion and social inclusion. The way in which exclusion operates in Kerala can also be analysed using these theoretical underpinnings. The social facts of caste, religion and community play a crucial role in formulating the complex operation of social exclusion.

‘Kerala model’ was one of the distinct variants of social and human development models which gave a unique position for the state in the global arena. It gained popularity and recognition as one of the most inclusive models of development in the Global South. Many social scientists compared Kerala’s rare feat with the successful models in the Global North. Some even classified it as a welfare-state model. Various governmental and non-governmental agencies also placed Kerala at the top in social inclusiveness.

Yet a proper conceptualisation of ‘exclusion’ remains elusive. Though Kerala is far ahead in its social development path, the phenomenon of exclusion persists in different areas. The exclusionary practices remain unquestioned in public discourses, mostly in the absence of an organised force or movement against exclusion which is perceptible in many areas and sectors in Kerala. The particularities and variations of exclusionary practices normalised in these areas demand attention. Even after decades of social and economic reforms, people belonging to different layers of Kerala society are facing unprecedented challenges emerging from consistent social exclusion. The primary level victims are the Dalit and Adivasi communities, women, transgender community and many other minorities in vulnerable positions. The changing dimensions of the reservation system are an example of how the social realm and the public sphere are engaging the critical questions of the marginalised people.

The concept of ‘economic reservation’ is, for example, justified by many who argue that caste-based reservation is an outdated concept. While exclusion and discrimination are primarily caste-related, how can the mandate for

reservation be decided solely based on economic status? In order to address this question, the idealisation of exclusion, as Foucault talked about, can be explored. The idea of exclusion, manifested externally by factors of economic development, has a deeper dimension within the innermost core of society. Many instances unravel underlying conditions of exclusion while considering Kerala society. The protests against entry of women in Sabarimala temple (in spite of the apex court judgement), the attacks on the tribal people, unequal distribution of civil rights for the trans community are some of them. All these underline the need for reframing and renegotiating the basic conceptualisation of social exclusion. Exclusion is not a mere absence of opportunities alone. It cannot be engaged using statistical data alone; nor can it be understood through the declarations by the government. Obviously, the Kerala 'model' of development would remain a rhetoric insofar as it has not helped improve the life-world conditions of the people on the margins. However, the challenges of inclusive development would remain a problematic for the state and its development trajectory.

Paradoxically, the concept of inclusive development has gained importance in the neoliberal era with the World Bank model of participatory strategies. It is therefore essential to be vigilant while delineating the boundary between 'economic' and 'social' dimensions of exclusion.

However, Kerala has shown a distinct social trajectory from other states in India in many aspects. The concept of 'renaissance' (often exemplified by the social reform and engaging modernity initiatives) is an example of how a state can achieve progress despite all social inabilities and challenges. The new dynamics and interventions swirling around the discourses on 'renaissance' must engage questions of social inclusion in Kerala. The ways in which people responded to various issues need to be analysed and new frameworks to be formulated in order to ensure the activation of inclusive development. Kerala has faced many disasters in recent years. There were major floods in 2018 and 2019, the Ockhi cyclone in 2017, and the Nipah virus outbreak in 2018. The spread of COVID-19 pandemic is a new challenge in contemporary times. During these critical times, the state did not witness any form of discrimination or exclusion. The people worked together in the fight against unforeseen disasters. Even the international media praised the flood relief

activities in Kerala (*The New York Times*, 17, 21 and 23 August 2018; *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2018; *The Guardian*, 21 August 2018). The well-coordinated attempts and strategies to tackle and contain the COVID-19 pandemic also got global attention (*BBC News*, 16 April 2020; *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2020; *The Guardian*, 14 May 2020; *The New York Times*, 16 July 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) says:

The state government's prompt response to COVID-19 can be attributed to its experience and investment made in emergency preparedness and outbreak response in the past during Kerala floods in 2018 and especially, the NIPAH outbreak in 2019. The state used innovative approaches and its experience in disaster management planning came in handy to quickly deploy resources and put up a timely and comprehensive response in collaboration with key stakeholders. Active surveillance, setting up of district control rooms for monitoring, capacity-building of frontline health workers, risk communication and strong community engagement, and addressing the psychosocial needs of the vulnerable population are some of the key strategic interventions implemented by the state government that kept the disease in control (WHO 2020).

The WHO report further noted that the state government “has adopted an inclusive approach and addressed the special needs of mentally-ill patients, children with special needs, migrant labourers and elderly people living alone.” It said that the “high literacy rate in the state and the empowered women self-help groups -Kudumbashree helped the cause in a big way.” The Report also mentioned that the “Community Kitchen initiative through the Local Self Government Department (LSGD) with the support of Kudumbashree has provided more than 8 651 627 free meals to the labourers, those who are in quarantine, isolation, destitute and other needy persons. Distribution of millions of cooked meals and provision of free ration under the Public Distribution Scheme to those in need is reflective of a well-thought and a caring response and relief strategy.” The Acting WHO Representative to India attributed the state's “success in effectively responding to the COVID-19 to its experience and systematic investment in health systems strengthening along with measures such as surveillance, risk communication and community engagement, early detection and broad social support.” She

also added that this “template could serve as a great example for other states to emulate” (Ibid).

Such incredible achievements continue to shore up hopes for the future and afford fresh ideas of an inclusive society—a society which is not only inclusive in economic terms, but reassuring a new development model, socially and culturally.

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