

KERALA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT IN DEEP CRISIS

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The narrow coastal strip in the Southwest corner of India with a less than 4 percent of India's population is among the smaller states of Indian Union. The three units (The native states of Travancore, Cochin and the Malabar District which was directly ruled by the British as part of the Madras Presidency) which were welded into one linguistic state of Malayalam Speaking people on 1 November 1956 were almost insignificant non-entities almost ignored on the national scene. All these spectacularly changed with the formation of Kerala state and especially when, following the second republican general election a Communist-led ministry was voted to power in the state on 5th April 1957 under the leadership of EMS Namboothiripad.

The installation of EMS Ministry was not a bolt from the blue. It was the logical culmination of kerala's politics from the days of freedom struggle during which the left wing and especially communists won the hegemony in the popular movement. It was a

story of mass and class mobilization of people, for the fulfillment of their immediate day-to-day needs and the ultimate aim of independence and social advance. It was also thrilling and occasionally chilling saga of both unarmed and armed struggles interspersed with prisons, torture, bans and hangmans hoose.

These struggles embraced the entire spectrum of and variety of social life, with special emphasis on abolition of untouchability, caste hierarchy, land reforms, workers rights, educational advance, literary and cultural revival. A number of different organizations were built up to pursue these objectives and newspapers, magazines and books were published systematically for the edification and enlightenment.

Foundations Well-Laid

Because of these traditions of mobilizations, struggles and articulation of popular demands, the first Kerala ministry had almost a ready made agenda and Man of action. Chief Minister EMS had an exceptionally talented team and without wasting time they plunged into action in different fields like land reform, decentralization of power educational reform, people-friendly police policy, prison reform, spread of irrigation projects, rural health care, revival of traditional industries, first steps towards advanced industrialization.

Though the Chief Minister in his very first address to the people over the All India Radio made it quite plain that establishment of communism or socialism was not on his immediate agenda and that he was concentrating on the implementation of the promises made by Indian National Congress during the freedom struggle and which were ignored on assuming power. He made special references to congress resolutions on land reforms and peoples rights in their Karachi and Faizpur resolutions. But unfortunately the congress opposition with the support of vested interests and communalists every popular measure adopted by the ministry and describing even primary reforms as “totalitarian communist designs” against democracy, church and religion. This campaign ultimately resulted in the central government dismissing EMS ministry even when it enjoyed a clear majority in the legislative assembly.

This high-handed action in contravention of the spirit of the constitution of India, not only slowed down the pace of social and economic reforms but opened the flood gates of communalism and casteism which has become the bane of Kerala politics even into the 21st century. But inspite of this sad nemesis of the first bold experiment of social, economic and cultural reform in a state, the successive governments which ruled Kerala during the fifty years of

its existence, often alternating between left and right, were never able to extricate themselves from the foundation stones of Kerala model securely laid in 1957-59. Some ministries took up the reforms to higher levels (like the second EMS ministry in 1967-69) some others tried to slow down but none could stop the process or reverse the momentum.

The Paradoxes

It is in this background that the so-called Kerala Model of Development with its abolition of land lordism, high literacy percentage, women's education which equals or even surpasses men's, ideal limited families, lowest child mortality and highest life expectancy rates in the country, housing levels far better than the rest of India etc. has attracted the attention of the world and earned praises from World Bank to UNCTAD. The statistics and indices of these remarkable achievements are too well-known to require any repetition. The essence of all these is the high quality of life achieved by the people and creditable social indices.

Euphoria over these incomparable achievements began to subside during the last ten or fifteen years. How long the state will be able to support these social security measures without any growth in agricultural production or any signs of industrial growth.

From the mid seventies onwards Kerala's agriculture is stagnant and in some key areas like food production is on a fast declining plain.

Traditional industries like coir, cashew, handloom, beedi, bamboo mats etc. are in a state of deep crisis and there is no sign of any significant rise in investment in modern industry. Unemployment and especially educated unemployment rate is perhaps higher in Kerala than other states. This is partly alleviated by the migration of workers, technicians and professionals to other countries and their remittance to home is a major source of Kerala's livelihood. But such sources are temporary and shifty and cannot be relied upon as permanent anchor.

A political structure and modus operandi suited to this new turn in Kerala's development which would prove as historic as was the new turn taken about half a century ago, was devised and initiated by the same man who led the first turn – viz EMS Namboodiripad. It was devolution of substantial power to the local self government institutions with sufficient representation for dalits, women and other marginalized and weaker sections of society. The development planning in this system is not from the top and state level but from the grass root level. Planning is a popular process with grama sabha (village assemblies) taking the lead. Though there may be sectors of development which require state

level planning fifty to sixty percent of funds are utilized by Panchayats, to implement their plans. So the planning and development in a large measure is taken away from ministers and bureaucrats at the helm and taken over by the people at large. Education, health, environmental protection, agriculture, irrigation, small-scale industrial enterprises including minor hydro electrical projects. Representative democracy, which require delegation of powers to representatives till the next elections is transformed, to an extent by participatory democracy. The people are not at the receiving end of a patronizing state, but they are empowered, trained and encouraged to shape their destiny themselves.

This experiment was a big success during the Left and Democratic ministry of 1996-2001. But the right-wing ministry of United Democratic Front (2001-2006) which followed almost killed the process. Now the Left and Democratic front has again come to power six months ago. It is hoped that the decentralization of power and people's planning is again taken up and Kerala Model is revived with necessary corrections. Though the limitation of being a state with limited powers are huge road blocks on the way, an alternate development plan as we have explained can go a long way to save Kerala from the brink of catastrophe.