God's own country courting disaster?

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Abstract

Kerala continues to be ahead of the other states of India in holistic and spatially dispersed development and efficient delivery of social services. But income inequalities are high and are also on the increase. Gender-bias seems to be creeping in too. All this coupled with recent attempts to side-line environmental concerns makes one wonder whether disaster of the type that befell Uttarakhand is waiting to happen in Kerala too?

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Introduction

The state of Kerala is reputed for its incomparable scenic beauty which has earned for it, the proud title of 'God's own country', in tourist parlance. Further, the state is recognized the world over as a role model for the development of the less developed regions. This is due to its outstanding performances in school education, health, poverty removal and reduction of gender bias, much before reaching a level of economic growth, considered commensurate for such achievements. Serious doubts used to be expressed by many including Tharamangalam (1998a) (1998b) about the sustainability of the Kerala model in a liberalized economic set-up. But the growth performance of Kerala's economy has set at rest these fears[1].

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[1] See Kannan(2005) and Nair(2000), among others

In assessing Kerala's development trajectory, though there are some genuine concerns about raising productivity in food crops, not all would shed tears for the state being not self-sufficient in food[2]. The track record of growth of Kerala's economy has also disproved the validity of protests against the absence of big factories in the state[3]. There are genuine fears, however, that rabid pursuit of economic growth may have an adverse impact on the relative edge that the state has over other states in terms of social indicators[4]. Adding fuel to this fire is the fact that the very same state, which saw the successful Silent Valley agitation to protect the state's unique environment in the late 90s, was witness, for the past one year, to another successful agitation for the exact opposite- to drastically cut down efforts to protect the fragile ecology of the Western Ghats regions in the state[5]. In view of all this, it would be interesting to examine Kerala's development experience, taking into account some recent evidence comparing the different states of India In this regard.

More bouquets

Kerala had the distinction of being miles ahead of the other states of India in terms of its Human Development Index (HDI) in earlier years. Such indices obtained by combining three different components – private consumption expenditure, education and health - prepared by the Institute of Applied Manpower Research for the year 2011-12 are now available. They clearly indicate that the state of Kerala continues to maintain its lead among the states of India on this front. Kerala's HDI has a value 0.840 while for India as a whole, it is much lower at 0.546 –less than two-thirds of the value for Kerala. The lowest ranked state in this regard is Chattisgarh with a value of HDI of 0.427 – around

[2] For discussions in this regard, please see among others, Sengupta and Sdasyuk (1968) and Balakrishnan (2014).
[3] Such a view about the manufacturing sector seems to have received a big boost after the recent hype about "Make in India" by the new government that has just come into power at the centre in India. For the futility of attempts like this of identifying particular sectors for engineering economic growth, see among others, Rajan (2014) and Nair et.al (2005)
[4] See, among others, Nair(2014)
[5] For details in this regard, please see, among others, Gadgil (2014)

half of that of Kerala[6]. This gives a broad indication that the state as a whole has not lagged behind other states in terms of overall well-being of people.

The unique endowment of natural resources in the state, however, warrants a closer look at the access to facilities for people in the different parts of the state. For instance, the % forest cover in Kerala is 44.52, which is more than double that for India as a whole[7]. Actually the Western Ghats are spread over 13 of the 14 districts of the state, the only exception being the district of Alappuzha which has, as a result, an abysmally low % forest cover- just 2.69. In fact, two of the districts- Waynad and Idukki (the largest district of the state in terms of area) have around 80% of area under forest cover. All the three southern districts of the state- Pathanamthitta, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram (where the capital city of the state is located)- have more than 50% area under forest cover. Even Kannur, which ranks just above Alappuzha in terms of % area under forest cover among the districts of Kerala, has more than one-fifth – to be precise 21.61% - of its area under forest cover. Two recent studies, Rajaraman(2014) and McKinsey Global Institute(MGI)(2014), throwing considerable light in regard to the regional spread of facilities in Kerala clearly show that the state is very much better off on these counts compared to the other states of India.

Rajaraman (2014) investigates the locational pattern of facilities for primary education and medical treatment in rural areas within each state of India. The analysis is carried out on the basis of data from the latest available Village Directory brought out in 2007 by the Indian Population Census office. These data relate to the early years of the new millennium. The paper studies 20 out of the 28 states in existence then, covering 513 of the 548 rural districts. Figure 1 of the paper, accompanied by the text, sets at rest concerns about the access to these two facilities in the different parts of Kerala. It clearly shows that the state is far ahead of other states if we consider the % villages in a district with primary schools. The same is true also if we consider the% villages in the different

[6] It has of course to be pointed out that the HDI for the National Capital Territory of Delhi is higher at 0.918.

[7] Data presented in this regard are on the basis of official publications of the Government of Kerala.

districts with medical facility, the latter percentage being slightly lower than the former. It is even more interesting that the variability between the districts on these counts, as denoted by the cross-district coefficients of variation for the concerned state, is the lowest in Kerala as compared to the other states considered in the study. The fact that the state had attained this before the national policies to improve spatial access on these counts had started taking effect, is particularly noteworthy.

A more exhaustive and recent finding in this regard is contained in MGI (2014). One of the many interesting things worked out in the report is an Access Deprivation Score (ADS) for the different states of India for the year 2011[8]. The ADS gives an idea of the lack of access to six basic services- healthcare, education, drinking water, sanitation, housing and energy. The first two of these are classified as community level basic services and the last four, as household level basic services based on the final point of service delivery. The value of ADS for three states – Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand- is as low as 33, while the corresponding value for India as a whole turns out to be as high as 46. In fact, only five of the 28 states have values for ADS lower than that for Kerala and these are Punjab, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Goa in that order with the lowest value being 26 for Goa. The value of ADS even for the National Capital Territory of Delhi is higher at 41. The ADS for the state of Bihar comes to 62 - the highest among the Indian states. Inter-district variability in ADS has been worked out for 22 states having 10 or more districts and none of these states have a lower value than that of Kerala for the cross-district standard deviation of ADS[9]. The National Capital Territory of Delhi is the only region of India which exhibits lower cross-district variability in ADS than the state of Kerala. The report further goes on to classify the 640 districts of India into five categories on the basis of ADS and none of the fourteen

[8] See MGI(2014), p 86

[9] It is true that Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Bihar exhibit the same cross-district variability as Kerala.

districts of Kerala falls into the most deprived or household services deprived categories[10].

The recent comparative study by Aguayo et.al (2014) of the different states of India from the points of view of child malnourishment and of policies to remove it, adds another feather to Kerala's cap in this regard. The study is based on the data from the latest round of the National Family Health Survey relating to the year 2005-06. It is path-breaking in two ways. Firstly, instead of looking at under-nourishment separately in terms of underweight, stunting, wasting and anaemia as earlier studies have done, it works out a child under-nutritional index (CUI) which takes into account all these four components in an equally weighted manner. When there is no child under-nutrition, the CUI is zero and when all children are undernourished- the worst scenario- the CUI is 100. While for India as a whole the CUI is as high as 33.1, for Kerala it is only 19.4. In fact there are only two states- Mizoram and Manipur -having lower values and the lowest value- for Manipur- is not much lower at 18.3. Even for the National Capital Territory of Delhi, the CUI is much higher at 27.5. Secondly, the paper also attempts to capture the performance of the Indian states in delivering proven essential nutrition-affecting interventions in terms of use of essential services and adoption of positive measures for infants and young children. This is done by working out, for each state, a child nutrition score (CNS) on the basis of ten equally weighted indicators reflective of feeding practices, preventive health care and sanitation. The CNS scale also goes from 0, showing no coverage at all of essential nutrition interventions, to 100 indicating universal coverage of essential nutrition interventions. Kerala's CNS is as high as 67.3 - almost double that of India as a whole which is only 34.9. In fact there is no Indian state having a higher CNS than Kerala. The value even for the National Capital Territory of Delhi is much lower at 45.1.

There is another interesting and noteworthy feature of Kerala's development in comparison with that of the other states of India. It is that though there has been considerable urbanization in the state particularly in the decade 2001-2011, this rampant

[10] See MGI (2014) p 88

urbanization did not result in the creation of slums in any big way[11].On the contrary, the state continues to remain even in the year 2011, as one of the very few states which were almost slum-free[12]. Out of the total of 65.49 million people living in slums in India, a very negligible number, just 0.02 million, is in Kerala. If we classify the different states of India on the basis of % urban population living in slums, Kerala is in the lowest category with less than 10% urban population living in slums, with the all-India figure being 17.45%. Even high per capita income states like Haryana and Maharashtra are in the 15-20% group. Three states, Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh are in the highest class-interval in this regard with 25% or more of urban population living in slums[13]. Skeptics may point out that it is one thing to say that there are no slums and quite another to say that there is proper housing. It would hence be well worth enquiring into Kerala's relative position compared to the other states of India in this regard[14]. It is universally recognized that if there is separate space available for cooking in a house, the chance of pollution for the members of the household gets reduced. In this regard too, the state of Kerala is much better off compared to the other states of India. The proportion of households with a separate kitchen available for cooking is the highest - 96.7 %- in Kerala among all the states of India[15]. The all India figure in this regard is only 61.3, while the corresponding value for Bihar is as low as 33- the lowest among all the states of India. Even higher per capita income states like Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra have values hovering around 72, with the value for Haryana being even lower at 66

[11] The growth protagonists have started trumpeting the fact that Kerala has come of age on the growth firmament because growth has now got reflected also in urbanization. The increase in % urban population between 2001 and 2011 has been the highest in the state in comparison with other states of India. In fact in 2011, 47.72 % population of Kerala stayed in urban areas while for India as a whole, the figure was much lower at 31.16. Only three Indian states, then in existence, had % urban population higher than that of Kerala. For more details in this regard, please see among others, Nair (2014).

[12] Only the state of Manipur was totally slum-free in 2011. Source of data, Government of India (2014)

[13] These three are among the so-called Naxal-affected states of India

[14] The fact that Kerala is too far ahead of most other states in terms of % houses with toilet facilities and also regarding the % people not defecating in the open compared to the other states of India is too well-known and is hence not gone into here.

[15] The figures here are from Census of India, 2011

New Brickbats emerging too

Many including Nair (2014) and The Economist (2013) have pointed out the fact that the state has been ranking high, compared to the other states of India, in terms of crime rates, suicide rates and per capita consumption of alcohol for a number of years, however. The high rank with regard to the first two may be looked upon partly as a result of the better reporting of these incidents in this highly literate and politically conscious state. But the fact that this has been consistently so for a number of years during which period the reporting in the other states must have undergone remarkable improvements, makes one wonder whether the King may actually be naked on this count in Kerala. Concern about the high rank in terms of the third- per capita alcohol consumption – is often dubbed as unwarranted moral policing in this age when the consumer has to be treated as the king. There are reasons to believe, however, that the relative position in crime rate if not the suicide rate in the state may, to some extent at least, be attributable also to the influence of Bacchus. But since alcohol is the hen that lays the golden egg in terms of state revenue, no coalition group in power in the state wants to touch it with a pair of tongs and all proudly talk of the success of the avoidance of the evils of bootlegging in the state[16]. As has been pointed out by many including Lindberg (2001), it must be borne in mind that it is the womenfolk, particularly in the poorer income groups, who have to bear the brunt of the adverse effects of this leadership of the state in per capita alcohol consumption. These three social trends in crime rate, suicide rate and alcohol consumption may be sought to be connived at by rabid proponents of economic growth. They would simply look upon these as necessary concomitants of economic growth in any part of the world.

But other portends too are emerging and these are such as to make these proponents sit up and even shudder a bit. Actually these are such that it may be a matter of time before the

[16] Leading Indian newspapers these days have detailed stories of a recent, feeble and failed attempt to restrict alcohol consumption in the state in the middle of 2014. It had to be almost completely withdrawn in stages as a result of opposition from various quarters and the opening of a few skeletons in the cupboard regarding also charges of corruption against the concerned minister.

distinguishing features of Kerala in terms of equity, absence of gender bias and environmental sustainability, become mere matters of past history.

A recent paper analysing the development experience of the different states of India by Bhattacharya and Bhattacharjee (2013) has brought out some interesting aspects about the extent of inequality of income as shown by the Gini coefficient calculated on the basis of data on per capita private consumption expenditure by the National Sample Survey of India. The study covers rural and urban areas separately and the analysis is for two years 2005-06 and 2010-11. For both the years and in the case of rural areas as well as urban areas, Kerala ranks the highest among the 28 states of India in terms of inequality of income. In the year 2005-06, the Gini coefficient for the rural and urban areas in Kerala was as high as 0.347 and 0.396 while the corresponding values for India as a whole was 0.281 and 0.364 respectively. The situation is no better if we consider the year 2010-11. The Gini coefficient for Kerala for rural and urban areas was 0.362 and 0.413 whereas the corresponding values of the coefficient for India as a whole were as low as 0.283 and 0.380 respectively. Add to this the fact that there were findings even earlier by Subramanian and Syam Prasad (2008) that with economic growth, inequalities are also on the increase in the state[17].

One of the usually considered indicators of the absence of gender-bias is the sex-ratio defined as the number of women for every 1000 men. The state does hold the first rank among the states of India in this regard. The sex-ratio in Kerala was 1054 in 2001 and it increased to 1088 in 2011[18]. A deeper analysis reveals causes for concern here too, however. If we consider the child sex-ratio defined as the sex-ratio in the age-group 0-6 years, the picture is not so rosy and may even be somewhat disturbing. In 2001, 11 of the 28 Indian states had child sex-ratios equal to or higher than that for Kerala. It is true that in 2011, only four states had child sex-ratios higher than that for Kerala[19]. But, by 2011,

[17] This may be considered as broadly supportive of the basic proposition in Piketty (2013) regarding income inequalities and capitalistic development at the regional level in India
[18] The source of data is Government of India (2011)
[19] For more details in this regard, see Nair(2014)

the state seems to have joined the mainstream of 19 of the 28 Indian states which experienced declines in child sex-ratios between the two points of time despite deliberate policy measures to prevent female foeticide. This makes one wonder whether 'the missing girls syndrome' bedeviling many a state in India has already made its presence felt in God's own country, overcoming even the strong matriarchal moorings in a number of its communities[20].

There are also definite indications that in the mad rush for growth, ecological considerations are being thrown to the winds in the state. The manner in which efforts to protect the Western Ghat regions of the state were made to vanish into thin air have been described in great detail in Gadgil (2014). All this is particularly worrisome if we take into account the fact that Kerala's environment is already in considerable jeopardy because of rampant economic growth. This is clearly brought out by a detailed comparison in this regard between the different states of India on the basis of the findings of Ramachandra and Shwetamala (2012). The paper works out the carbon status, defined as the ratio between carbon sequestered and carbon emitted. The carbon status of a state can be considered as an indicator of environmentally sustainable development in that state. Kerala's development has been such that despite its high % forest cover, it belongs to the lowest category in this regard with a value less than 0.1 for its carbon status. It is nowhere in the picture compared to north-eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, which has the highest carbon status of 7.5 among the states of India. Nor can it hold a candle even to states like Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh.

The balance sheet

Regional analysts, with a holistic view of development, will, in the light of these findings, be tempted to draw parallels between the states of Kerala and Uttarkhand. At first sight, this might appear to be a far-fetched idea. This is so because these two states seem poles

[20] Please see among others, Chakraborty,and Darshy Sinha(2006) on possible explanations

apart as they are actually located almost at opposite ends of the Indian sub-continent. A closer analysis would reveal some surprising similarities between the two, however. For one thing, both are small in terms of area with each having between 1 and 2% of India's geographical area. For another, Uttarkhand too is a highly mountainous region located on the foothills of Himalayas and was actually carved out by putting together the mountainous regions of former Uttar Pradesh. Further, both states have more or less the same % area under forests. Uttarakhand is also known for its bounty of nature and is reputed for its scenic beauty. Moreover, as in the case of Kerala, environmental awareness in Uttarakhand has been noteworthy in the past. The state had seen the birth of the famous Chipko movement pioneered by women to protect trees and prevent deforestation. The terrible flood disaster in Uttarakhand in 2013 was preceded by agitations in the state for something diametrically opposite, however. The agitators were strongly in favor of clearing forest areas for promoting the already high rate of economic growth of the state even further[21]. More and more evidence is now coming out to show that such blind pursuit of growth in utter disregard of ecological considerations was, to a great extent, responsible for the terrible deluge in the state[22].

The way growth-oriented development is taking place in Kerala, there are genuine fears that there will soon emerge increasing social tensions of an alarming nature[23]. But even more disturbing are the indications that environmental disasters, as severe as the ones that took place in the '*Devabhoomi*' in the opposite corner of India, may simply be waiting to happen in the state of Kerala too[24].

[21] For interesting details regarding, comparative rates of growth of the different states of India, see, among others, ,Nair (2013) and Misra(2013)
[22] See among others, a recent piece, by Upadhyay (2014,)
[23] For an in-depth analysis of social problems that will arise as a result of migration with particular reference to Kerala, see, among others, a recent piece by Raman (2012)
[24] Uttarakhand is a place of great religious importance for the majority of Indians who are Hindus and is hence often referred to as *Devabhumi* or God's abode.

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