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The thesis of Angela Christina Maddux entitled
A UNIQUE COMMITMENT TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF KERALA

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor
of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School for Summer and Continuing Education
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Mentor(s)

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A UNIQUE COMMITMENT TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:
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A Thesis
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requirements for the degree of
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By

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A UNIQUE COMMITMENT TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:
THE CASE OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT

The problem investigated in this thesis is human development and, specifically, human development in Kerala, India's most densely populated state. The study seeks to explain how the people of this state were able to move out of absolute poverty and discrimination to enjoy the highest life expectancy and literacy of all the states in India, as well as a decent standard of living. This is also an examination of the role of the people themselves and that of their government in achieving such impressive results in only one generation despite its poverty and without following the Western growth pattern of capital investment.

The method of enquiry has been a study into Kerala's social history to identify the basic forces which inspired the people to unite in the struggle for a better quality of life. The research has focused specifically on the multi-religious aspects of Kerala's history, its traditional interest in improving the education of all its people, and the importance it has placed on health care.

A number of secondary sources have been consulted including books on political science and development in general and on Kerala's religious, social and political history in particular, as well as journals from India and the international community.
The study has revealed that it took radical reforms to break up the feudal tenant-farmer system and put an end to the rigid caste system, and only the Communist party had the will and the popular support to do so at the time. It had become clear that without these two major reforms, development could not advance.

Because of Kerala's cosmopolitan culture and multi-religious history, the people had, over many generations, built up a tolerance for other customs and faiths. This tolerance combined with their long tradition of education had given the people the confidence to seek change. It had also helped the poor people unite as a class and form associations and popular organizations through which the Communist government was able to implement the most necessary reforms.

Briefly, it was the unique features of Kerala's culture which had enabled its people to come to grips with its past and launch into a new future.
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INTRODUCTION

Kerala, this narrow strip of land the size of Switzerland on the south-west tip of India, has 29 million inhabitants and is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. Despite its poverty, Kerala ranks the highest of all Indian states in human development, the key indicators being infant mortality, longevity and literacy. Social scientists refer to Kerala as a “model of social development.”\(^1\) What motivated these people to what must have been radical reforms? What made them decide that a better life was possible, that babies were born to grow up and lead productive lives; not die of disease and malnutrition? That there was a certain law of natural equality in this world, that human beings had a potential to develop in different ways? They must have had the grain of human dignity murmuring deep inside them to stand up and demand change. No change is easy and social change especially can be painful.

How did the people of Kerala achieve this quality of life without following the Western economic growth pattern and at what sacrifice? Was the model of Communism which they adopted at the critical time of change necessary to achieve this? I want to look into Kerala’s social and religious history to find indicators in its culture as to why and how it developed its own particular type of Communism and how it has affected human development in Kerala; what the particular characteristics of this system are and how some of the selective key points compare with Western democratic values.

Most of the people of Kerala at the beginning of this century did not think of life in terms of human values, nor had they ever heard about Western democratic values. The freedom to choose among life’s many
opportunities for self-realization was unknown territory. They were poor as far back as family memory went. This was not a relative poverty of less income or opportunities than others within their state or knowledge; it was absolute poverty with rampant malnutrition and disease. It was a life of discrimination and exploitation without hope or human dignity.

We could say that this sub-standard of human existence was reason enough to seek change. But it can be easier to accommodate to poverty --especially in a maritime tropical climate where fruits and vegetables grow in abundance--than to pull out of it in new imaginative ways.

When Kerala has become the appealing success story it has, it is because its achievements have been made within the most important aspects of development. For there can be no doubt about human development being the most fundamental aspect of development. It is also the oldest as well as eternal aspect of development for it will continue as long as man exists. Just as all human activities change to respond to social and political needs, priorities change along with the progress of history. In our century, political leadership of the few for the many has shifted to political leadership of the many for all in most countries. In this evolution of empowerment of the many, battles and clashes have raged and values have changed.

I believe that religion and education are the two fundamental agents of change. Both inspire people to look beyond their immediate needs and seek empowerment. After more than half a century of international efforts to help develop the poor countries, development priorities have evolved and now the concepts of individual and spiritual freedom are entering increasingly into the discussions about the practical dimensions of development.
Geographically isolated from the main block of India—now the world’s largest democracy with an ever-growing population of about 950 million\(^2\)—Kerala’s history is dominated by the accommodation of at least three of the world’s major religions within its boundaries.

This rich religious historical background is, in my opinion, one of the main factors which has influenced Kerala’s rapid progress in human development. Referring to religion during his recent visit to Cuba, John Paul II called it the “surest guarantee of integral development.” Without religion, or other equally strong common bonds—like political conviction—which cement people together, it is difficult to form a community. And without a sense of community which extends beyond tribal society, the idea of social development becomes stillborn.

If human values are born and nurtured in religion, then education is the path to empowerment through self-reliance and self-help. Together religion and education form a person’s identity and provide the essential tools for change. In this paper I will demonstrate how Kerala’s multi-religious culture and early educational opportunities for its people have influenced social progress and enabled them to reach this high level in human development and what that entails.
ENDNOTES


CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY

As far back as 3000 B.C. Kerala was a meeting place between East and West. The ports along this coast facing the Arabian Sea bustled with international trade. The region's abundance of spices, especially pepper, and teak as well as pearls and diamonds and other natural resources, attracted first the Arabs, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Israelites, the Greeks and the Romans from the West and the Chinese from the East. They were later followed by the Portuguese, the Dutch and, of course, the British. Most of them left their stamp on the region some of which stand out in plain view along the sea front like the exotic Chinese fishing nets designed for their mechanical method of fishing, which are still in use today, and some of which are buried deep in their culture.

Before it was united into the State of Kerala in 1956, this region consisted of three-and-a-half states: Travancore, Malabar and Cochin, and the southern part of Canara. The two princely states, Travancore and Cochin, had already been united in 1947 after India's independence. The reason for uniting these states was because they all spoke the same language, Malayalam.¹ This new union was the result of a political movement, which had grown out of a decision made by the Indian National Congress in 1920, to make state boundaries correspond with linguistic frontiers which the Communists exploited and even pressed for letting such new states break off into independent countries, like Pakistan.

Kerala took its name from the ancient kingdom of Keralaputra, which

¹
in the third century had similar boundaries to modern Kerala. To the west the state’s long coastline borders the Arabian Sea with the gateway to Western culture. To the east the land rises into the Western Ghats range of mountains with the State of Tamil Nadu on the other side facing the Bay of Bengal. It is a rich land of coconut plantations and paddy-fields in the lowlands, coffee and tea, with rubber plantations on the hills above, and the many spices which have delighted gourmets for centuries. The forests in the mountainous area above are full of precious trees including teak, rosewood and mahogany. But the deforestation has been severe and the average rainfall has declined as a result. Without the government’s reforestation program today, the soil erosion could bring about a severe water shortage causing serious health problems.  

Religion runs like a river through the history of this region. Hindus, Christians and Muslims, together with some Jews, have descended on this small area. In accommodating to each other’s religious and cultural traditions over many centuries they have shown tolerance and understanding for each other’s faith. I believe that this accommodation to living in a multi-religious society has become a traditional requirement which is now part of their culture. It has enabled them to better meet the challenges of social development and will prove invaluable in our new world of global communication.

Kerala’s ancient history is dominated by influences from other parts of the world through religion and trade.

First the Aryans came down from the north of India in the third century B.C. bringing both Hinduism and the caste system to a people who were then practicing the Dravidian religion. A new Hinduism developed and
eventually became the predominant religion in A.D. 9 which it still is today with sixty percent of Kerala’s people being Hindu.

The first Christian to reach this coast is believed to have been the Apostle St. Thomas who came in A.D. 52 and founded seven churches along the coast. By the fifteenth century these Christians were respected members of the community all thanks to the tolerance of the Hindu rulers who had welcomed them with privileges and favors encouraging them in their business and trade enterprises at a time when especially the pepper trade was booming. The Hindus and Christians were treated as equals while feudalism was blossoming and the caste system was tightening its grip on the society.³

With the arrival of more Christians they started breaking up into different groups. When the Portuguese arrived in 1498 and encountered the Kerala Christians, who adhered to the Mother Church in Persia and followed the Syriac rite with allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch, a schism developed between them and the newcomers who adhered to the Pope in Rome. St. Francis Xavier arrived in 1541, carrying nothing but his breviary. He walked through the fishing villages along the coast of Travancore gathering the people with his little bell. He had managed to translate the Catechism into the Malabar language with the help of some of the most intelligent inhabitants there and wrote home to the Society of Jesus in 1544: “.... I assembled them twice a day and taught them the Christian doctrine and thus within the space of one month, the children had it well by heart.” St. Francis inspired these fishermen and other low-caste people with his preaching and genuine understanding of their way of life. Unfortunately he did not stay long enough to have a long-lasting influence in their lives. In the early nineteenth century, at the height of the British colonial power, the English
missionaries arrived and established the Anglican Church which is now part of the Church of South India. Other minor Protestant denominations followed and together with five different branches of the Roman Catholic Church, the Christians today make up twenty-one percent of Kerala's population.4

With the constant flow of Arab traders, it did not take long after Muhammed's new religion had taken root before Islam reached Kerala in the eighth century. The Hindu rulers were then just as tolerant with their new Muslim brothers as they had been with the Christians and established a social structure of parallelism among these different religions in Kerala. As the wealth of the Arab merchant princes increased so did their influence with the Hindu rulers, but they never involved themselves in politics. They built their mosques, prospered in business and spread inland from the coastal towns. In the 1920s, the Muslims started promoting social progress with Islamic ideals in their communities building new colleges and institutions for Arabic studies and Islamic literature, which are also being opened up to women. Today the Muslims make up about nineteen percent of Kerala's population.

There is still a handful of Jews in Kerala concentrated around the historic synagogue in the famous port town of Cochin where the first Jewish community in India settled in the fourth century.

The link between religion and human development is tied together with education. But in India the rigid caste system blocked the way and Kerala was known as “a madhouse of caste” because it had the strictest rules enforcing the different categories of the caste structure in all India.

One of India’s visionaries in the nineteenth century, Naranyana Guru, who was both a spiritual and a realistic man—as religious as democratic—saw
that the Western education leads to a better standard of living for all the people. A dispossessed himself, he had experienced the degradation and poverty as a result of this caste system which classified people into social groups in which they were doomed for life. While the system maintained a certain equilibrium among the people as long as the Brahmans were respected for their privileged place at the top and the untouchables at the bottom accepted their miserable status, it is of course against any democratic principle. It is also a time bomb ticking away in a society waiting for an educated people to light the fuse.

Narayana Guru believed in the equality of different religions "if the individual becomes good." He also believed in a society without class and caste: "One Caste, One Religion, One God for man." He preached tolerance and said that: "The greatest science man can study is the science of living with other men." His fight against the caste system in Kerala led to universal education in all its government schools by 1912. Together with special caste organizations and the Indian National Congress promoting civil and democratic rights, they also managed to change the social customs regarding marriage and inheritance laws and open up the temples to the untouchables. But none of this, or what was to follow in more radical forms, would have been possible without universal education.

There can be no doubt in anybody's mind that the only way out of poverty is through education. John Kenneth Galbraith said in the early eighties: "It's literacy that comes first. We [economists] had our sequential priorities wrong. We thought we could start with capital investment; we should have started with investment in education." Without education, people would not be able to improve their most basic needs or participate in
their country’s political, cultural, and social activities. While the potential for human development is equally ripe with promises in any country, rich or poor, we must remember that the whole idea of altruistic development on a large scale originated in the West, and that it would not have been possible without the revolutionary inventions in science and technology or Western democracy. This whole new idea was also a warning to the world that the more lopsided a society is, the more radical the reforms must be.

When Kerala was made a state within the Indian federal system, it was ripe for radical reforms. As with most other influences in Kerala’s earlier history, these radical reforms were also rooted in ideas from abroad. These ideas had originated in Moscow around 1920 as part of Comintern which was set up in Moscow to control the national Communist parties worldwide. But in India they soon realized that they did not only have to contend with Gandhi, whose preaching for non-violent confrontation built on religious conceptions had become a bastion against mass revolution, but with the Indian people themselves who were not receptive to this new materialistic dogma. The many Communist agents did not find fertile soil with the Indian intellectuals in India either. But once the Indians had been uprooted from their own environment and influenced by contemporary Western teaching at universities in England especially, where intellectual cynicism and negative countercultural ideas were simmering in the society, they began to open up to these new ideas. This was how Communism found a foothold in India among its young students in England who returned with new progressive ideas to their home country, which was then preparing to throw off the outdated imperialist yoke of the British.

The Communist movement in India was therefore inspired and
subsequently directed by the Communist Party of Great Britain until it gradually grew into its own. When the Communist Party of India (CPI) was declared legal in 1942 it took the side of the British in the war against Germany, which had by then invaded Russia. Consequently the CPI took the side of Russia and found itself opposing the Congress in its anti-British, and therefore anti-war, attitude. This did not make it any easier for the CPI to win support.

The Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s sympathies with the left were no secret, and the Communists used this to their advantage. They also undermined the powerful businessmen who were ready to negotiate large investments from Western capitalists which the Communists saw as another opportunity for Anglo-American imperialism.

Communists would always exploit weakness and step in where local issues were dividing the people. This was how the CPI first gained the necessary votes to govern the State of Kerala. Most of these votes came from the Hindu communities, who objected to the Christians having gained majority in the State Congress Party, and from the low-caste and poor people without any other hope for a better life.8
ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., 39-40.


4. Franke and Chasin, 49.


8. Ibid., 385.
CHAPTER TWO

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

When Kerala has been called a “model of social development,” it is because of its successes in human development measured in life expectancy, infant mortality, and literacy rates. Kerala has achieved India’s lowest infant mortality and halved its birth rate in thirty years.\(^1\) It has also achieved India’s highest literacy rate for both men and women in the rural as well as the urban areas. The life expectancy at birth for men is now nearly 69 years and for women just over 74 years.\(^2\)

These achievements, which are impressive for any higher-income country, became possible because education and learning had been a much-valued tradition in their culture for generations. And since the educators had been mostly religious men and women, the moral and cultural traditions had been emphasized in the schools. This combination of education and religion had given the people self-confidence which showed up later in their enthusiastic participation in politics and militant defense of their human rights. Education and poverty are explosive partners and, when the Communists appeared on the scene with their proposals for radical reforms, these very poor people saw an opportunity to improve their lives and joined together in public action programs.

In terms of human development, the Communists did help improve the lives of the poor people of Kerala, but Kerala is still a very poor state. While the state managed to have the largest poverty reduction among the Indian
states during the past forty years, its real GNP per capita in 1992 was only 4.6 compared with the overall India of 5.2. By giving priority to the social sector in its development plans, the state government had neglected the industrial sector. The economy had obviously suffered as a result of having parted from the conventional Western pattern of growth, which relies on a foundation of industrial development. It was not long before questions were asked if the economy would be able to sustain these social services.

Education today means literacy, and with literacy comes freedom: freedom to think and freedom to act. The ideal of freedom itself is a modern concept in social development and its survival is as tenuous as a nation’s moral fiber.

Not only does Kerala enjoy India’s highest literacy rate, but it is the only state which has reached way above the required eighty-five percent of adult literacy which UNESCO has earmarked as the criterion for “total literacy.” While this goal has been reached during the last decade, the ideal of universal education was introduced with Christianity. Education for the masses was provided “using temples as centers” during the first five centuries of the Christian era. Instruction was given in the form of Puranic stories and old devotional songs to women as well as men. Especially the women of the matriarchal Nayar caste took advantage of this non-formal education. But with the growing prominence of the Hindu religion enforcing its rigid caste system, education became a privilege for only the high castes. Women and low-caste persons were refused access to education.

New schools, which were attached to the Hindu temples, were opened for the high-caste Brahmin youths. As the temples increased their influence on the social and cultural life, these boarding schools—or Temple
Universities--became more in demand. They were financed by the affluent members of the community who took great pride in their standards of excellence. Admission was subject to merit, each school having only ninety-five places. Once accepted to this higher-learning institution, which included theological studies, discipline was as strict as the studies were demanding.

Another new system of village schools was built up all over Kerala in the seventeenth century and flourished through much of the nineteenth century until education in the English language became a priority. These schools, which were also financed by the wealthy high-caste families, were designed for the masses. Lessons in health care and moral principles were given high priority followed by logic and grammar in the advanced classes.

The importance of physical education, combined with fencing and training in the use of arms for the boys, was emphasized in other continuing schools, which are unique to Kerala. Upon graduation, these boys became the best fighters. \(^5\) Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, at the time of invading marauders and social strife, this training was in such demand that it ended up replacing the classic academic subjects in the Hindu Temple Universities.

The Muslims had special schools attached to their mosques for religious instruction where Arabic and Islamic scriptures were studied, and the Christians founded seminaries and colleges for their religious training.

The first printing press was established by the Portuguese upon arrival at Cochin in the sixteenth century. With the first of many seminaries built there in 1541, “Cochin became a great Latin center......comparable to some of the best cities in Europe.” \(^6\) Great centers of learning and culture also grew up around the royal rulers who were either scholars themselves or patrons of
scholars. Trivandrum, where culture and the arts flourished in the nineteenth century, is now the capital of Kerala as well as a center of education around the Kerala University, which became the first modern university in Kerala.

British and other foreign missionaries came to the Malabar coast in 1792. They combined conversion and social reform with education of especially the lowest castes, the poor and the women, who by this time had no other access to education. One missionary spent more than fifty years promoting education in Travancore during which time the first school for girls was started in 1819. A government-school for training female teachers was set up in 1887, and, already in 1901, Travancore was first among all Indian states in female education. 7

These missionary schools, usually Protestant, became so successful that the rulers began to see them as a threat to their rigid caste-system and introduced their own government-supported schools. The fifteen-year old Princess and ruler of Travancore issued a Royal Rescript that education in Travancore should be universal and free so that “the people would become better subjects and public servants and that the reputation of the state might be advanced thereby.” 8 But it would take many years before this state policy was enforced. The language of instruction in the government-sponsored schools was Malayalam while the missionaries and the British colonial government after 1830 used English in their schools.

The Travancore government continued its progressive approach to improve education starting new vernacular primary schools, a Vernacular Book Committee which by 1870 produced textbooks in the Malayalam language, and introduced “a general test to be passed as a condition of
employment in the government service in any capacity above that of a peon (messenger).” 9 The necessity of literacy to function in a modern society together with the advantages of a government job inspired the parents to release their children from their manual labor and send them to school. The government provided grants-in-aid to schools subject to their meeting a certain standard. By around 1895 forty percent of Travancore’s children—boys and girls—were enrolled in these schools. In 1896 fees for girls in primary schools were abolished and in 1906 free education was open to all lower castes. 10 By 1912 universal education had become established.

In the other two states, Cochin and Malabar, education became a priority only when the need for literacy demanded it. As an international trading center with its busy seaports, Cochin needed clerks and officials. By 1909 free primary education for girls and lower-caste Hindus was introduced. The State of Malabar had a different history having been annexed by the British into the Madras Presidency in late 1700 after twenty-five years of a devastating military occupation by the Mysoreans. With the high proportion of thirty percent Muslims, who were poor tenants and landless laborers, a few Christians and the rest Hindus, it took longer for the new school system to get established. But when the local governments were reformed in 1919 and got a larger budget for education, the schools multiplied and in twenty years the literacy rate increased by over sixteen percent. 11 Already in 1941 Travancore’s and Cochin’s literacy rates were the highest in India. 12

The caste associations played an important part in the struggle for universal literacy which became a right and turned into a popular mass movement. Libraries were set up in all villages and became important centers
around which intellectual life was encouraged with reading and writing circles. People's awareness of social and political development sharpened. With the largest circulation of newspapers in India—over thirty-five with a circulation of 2.2 million—nothing escaped them, and they were not afraid of taking action.

Starting in the nineteenth century, a primary factor in Kerala's human progress has been the high female literacy as a result of the matrilineal customs. Some of the Hindu castes—chiefly the Nayars—were matrilineal until around 1930. The Nayars made up a large and important group of Kerala's population. As professional soldiers—especially before the British came—and landowners, they were highly respected members of the community. While the head of the family was the oldest man, women had freedom in all matters including marriage and divorce. The children lived with their mother and her extended family through the female line. Much of the land also belonged to the Nayar women with the inheritance laws being in their favor. With this ownership of land and freedom came also respect and appreciation of female babies and the importance of their education.

During the last fifty years education improvements in Kerala have continued. What started by the first Christians and was continued by some individual luminaries and other dedicated people centuries ago has now developed into a broad education program which, hopefully, will soon result in compulsory education for Kerala as well as all-India.

Whereas in the Western countries the development of the industrial sector would have been the largest item in the state budget, in Kerala it was the education sector which took this place. With the expansion of the education system, the number of private schools increased, especially the number
of Catholic private schools with the continuation of the state’s policy of grants-in-aid. As these schools turned into a lucrative business, they were criticized for their weak management including favoritism and corruption. Efforts by the state to become more involved in the management of these schools, particularly with regard to the choice and payment of teachers and the centralization of the preparation and publication of textbooks, were rebuffed by the schools. They wanted to maintain their independence and saw any socialist encroachment as an affront against the primary rights of an individual. All attempts by the state government to secularize the private schools failed and, when the Communist government was first elected in 1957, it was no surprise when the reform of the education system became a priority.

The Kerala Education Bill was introduced immediately having been prepared in advance in cooperation with the dissatisfied teachers. The main intent of the Bill was to improve and standardize the organization of the general education and to protect the rights of the teachers. In extreme cases of lax management, the state would be authorized to take over the school and pay rent to that school’s management. As the teachers were paid by the government, their appointments should also be authorized by them and be drawn from a group of previously approved teachers. The Bill was sent to President Nehru in New Delhi for approval, but he sent it on to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court finally ruled on it in May 1958 to a mixed reaction from the two opposing camps. To the Catholics’ dismay, the state was given “statutory rights to improve certain regulations in schools if state aid was given to them.” 13 The Communist camp became anxious because the schools were given religious neutrality and neither students nor teachers had the right to participate in any disrupting public demonstrations.
While the implementation of the Education Bill did not end the conflict between the private and public schools, it did enable each to continue in its own way with the private government-aided schools teaching in English and the all-state schools in Malayalam. Some people, at both ends of the political spectrum, believe that the education in the private schools is superior. 14 This would obviously cause friction in the long run and give an unfair advantage to those who can afford to pay the fees.

The importance of health care has been a long-standing priority in this region which is not surprising being the most densely populated state in India. With both the northeast and the southwest monsoons, the state also has the highest average rainfall and an all-year temperature between 80° and 90°F. One of the state government's goals became to give the people a scientific understanding of the problems which affect their social and ecological environment. In 1963 a new organization called the Kerala People's Science Movement (KSSP) was formed with rural and urban units throughout the state. Here they put on films and science puppet shows and ran study classes on a variety of relevant subjects, particularly on public health. In the rural areas special "health parliaments" were arranged. With its regularly published magazine, the KSSP has also become an influential and powerful voice of the people.

Public commitment in promoting health care has been invaluable. By 1992—in only one generation—Kerala's infant mortality rate had been reduced to seventeen per thousand, compared with seventy-nine for all-India; this was a giant leap from 1960 with 120 versus 140 for all-India. Life expectancy for men was now ten years longer and for women fifteen years longer
than for all-India. Another interesting point is that child labor was much lower in Kerala than in all-India in 1981. The large proportion of literate women has no doubt made them a major force in the whole public health campaign. With specialized training these women have become health workers, midwives, nurses and even doctors. They work not only inside Kerala but are in demand in other states of India as well as in other countries.

Due to early use of vaccinations started in Travancore, smallpox and malaria had been eradicated by the 1970s. The new State Health Education Bureau set up a major state-wide program with health package programs, films and forums for discussion with medical personnel from the Directorate of Health Services. The teaching material consisting of non-technical books about all health-related matters was published in collaboration with the Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE). A Primary Health Center was also opened up in every village with a permanent staff of several doctors and nurses, several of whom had to be women according to the law.

Local Maternity and Child Health Services were also set up to advise women about family planning and encourage them to seek early advice with prenatal and post-natal health care from trained midwives. As a result, institutional childbirth increased. Medical and paramedical personnel made extensive house visits both before and after a childbirth and carried out an effective immunization program, especially for the pregnant women.

The easy access to these medical facilities together with the high female literacy rate, low infant mortality and high life expectancy have been the main contributing forces in reducing the birth rate to its impressively low rate of eighteen per thousand in only one generation. It is interesting to
note that the lowest infant mortality was among the Christians and the highest among the Muslims. However, since the rates varied among the Hindus depending on class rather than caste, the assumption is that class is the deciding factor and not religion or caste.

Kerala’s extensive health delivery system has been a major drain on its resources. In 1982 the state had a health budget which was thirty-five percent higher per capita than in the whole of India. With four times as many hospitals it had twice as many hospital beds per 100,000 people and a ratio of doctors to patients which was eighteen percent above India’s ratio. Due to the density of habitation and the relatively short distances with a good road system in the rural areas, about eighty percent of the people have been treated in hospitals instead of the Primary Health Centers since 1965. 18

Other important sectors of the social environment which affect the health standard are housing, sanitation, supply of drinking water and, of course, nutrition.

Kerala has designed different ways of assuring that all the people get enough nutrition. Fish, which used to be the main protein provider, has become too expensive for daily consumption. Because Kerala uses its best land for cash crops, it has to depend on imported rice which is subject to price fluctuations. Most of the imported rice and other grains have therefore come in under the government’s distribution programs through ration shops, which were opened up during the First World War. They have since become an institution under their new name of “fair price shops.” They are either cooperatives or privately owned and are allowed to receive a fixed profit on their sales. While these shops are primarily for the poor, access to purchase of the different subsidized products vary. As an example, purchase of rice
depends on the amount of rice land owned by the household. 19 In this way, the state government is enforcing a redistribution of income.

This initial food rationing had sprung out of the workers' and tenant farmers' crusade against the landlords' exploitation of them which culminated in an open struggle in 1946, and which the landowners lost. Instead of selling their surplus grain at a high price to the markets outside the state, the landowners were forced to deliver it to the local fair price shops at a reduced price. These shops are all over India, but Kerala has the largest network of them at close enough proximity to all the people.

When the Communist government came to power in 1957 they expanded the existing food program for the poor children to include all students. By 1987 the number of children who received their main meal, which was designed to provide the appropriate calories and proteins, increased to a total of three million a day. 20

Other government-funded feeding centers for women and infants have been set up by women's associations. By 1988 there were over nine thousand such centers which have become a fixed source of nourishment for a major proportion of women and infants. An additional free source of nourishment is the coconut tree, which is part of the natural flora. With its milk and meat, this fruit provides an informal calorie supply to the people's diet. Because the coconut is so full of nourishment, the people call it "the giver of all our needs."

The housing standard for the poor in Kerala was a hazard to their health. Their primitive dwellings were overcrowded and infested with mosquitoes and bacteria. The state government launched a national building program in the 1970s. In eight years 57,000 houses were built for the landless
laborers, and the program continues. 21

The sanitation problems are still a health hazard although there has been some improvement with the drainage and sewage disposal in the urban areas in the last years. One saving factor in the villages is that the houses are built as separate units surrounded by a small strip of land.

Protected water supply is rare, and nothing is more fatal for the infant mortality rate than the lack of safe drinking water. Thanks to their custom to boil the water before using it, some of the problems with gastrointestinal and other infections have been prevented. Since the eighties the portion of the population benefiting from piped water supply is increasing; ten years ago eighty-two percent of the urban population enjoyed potable water but only about half that number in the rural areas. 22

When President Nehru made his opening speech after India’s independence in 1947, he referred to the task ahead as “the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity.” 23 These are inspiring words for any nation, old or new. Kerala has come a long way in meeting these challenges. Since 1991, it is one of India’s four states in which income poverty has been reduced at least fifty percent. 24 It has not been done the conventional way of the Western democratic countries by promoting economic growth through industrial development. The state government has done it with the participation of a people whose belief in education and cultural values motivated them to seek change. When the Communists proposed radical reforms in the state’s first elections in 1957, it was therefore only natural that they would win the majority.
ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., 256.


6. Ibid., 291.

7. Nag, 32.


10. Ibid., 455.

11. Ibid., 460-61.

12. Ibid., 471.


15. Ramachandran, 229.

17. Ibid., 52.

18. Franke and Chasin, 41-44.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 29.


22. Ibid., 39.


CHAPTER THREE

THE STATE’S ROLE IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REFORM

Having examined briefly the religious background and social progress, it is now time to look into the political elements which played such a unique role in Kerala’s development. There is no doubt that the radical reforms which transformed this state could not have been implemented by any other than the Communist government at that time.

When the Communist party was voted in through democratic elections as Kerala’s first government in 1957, it had the full support of the majority of the people. It also had the support of President Nehru who was favorably impressed with the Communists’ plan for the solutions to Kerala’s social problems and believed that not every state need be of the same political configuration. This plan, which formed the basis for the Communists’ whole election campaign, was outlined in a manifesto entitled “Communist Proposal for Building a Democratic and Prosperous Kerala.” The fact that this was a Communist state government—and the first of its kind to be elected anywhere by popular vote—within a democratic nation, gave it a special character. It meant that the national government would serve as a break on its power and protect the people from authoritarian rule, which would have happened had Kerala been an independent country.

Politics plays a large role in the people’s lives in Kerala and public action has always been behind the government. Every state government, starting with this first Communist government, has acted in response to political action organized by the people. In view of the state’s acute economic
and social problems, the Communist party had no difficulty attracting members from the unions and other organizations of workers, peasants, agricultural laborers, students and teachers. For over two decades before its election in 1957, the Communists had been active gaining followers and organizing them into mass political movements.

People of extraordinary abilities and intellectual power from the Hindu upper castes joined and built up the Communist party starting in the early thirties. The two men who became the top Communist leaders in Kerala were E. M. S. Namboodiripad and A. K. Gopalan Nambiar. Namboodiripad became the party's leader and Chief Minister of the first Communist government. A journalist with a passion for social reform, he had mobilized and formed public opinion. Gopalan went from being a progressive teacher to a wandering public speaker in the villages urging on the national movement. He became state secretary and was always the best loved government official both inside and outside the party. India's first woman to hold a cabinet position was K. R. Gouri in the first Communist government. She drafted the Kerala Land Reform Act. She is also one of India’s most gifted lawyers. Another exceptional Keralite is the present President of India, K. R. Narayanan, who is the first former untouchable in this position. As we can see, Kerala has produced great leaders of national fame, people of courage and dedication.

With a reputation for honest integrity even among their adversaries the Communist leaders were able to play important roles in the Conservative-led coalition governments. They also abided by the electoral rules each time the opposing Congress party and its allies were voted back in. Nevertheless, the Communist leaders have remained militant activists in a radical political culture and have continued their struggle for reforms within the Indian
Constitution and the official Five-Year Plans.

The two most significant reforms which transformed the course of Kerala's society were the redistribution of land and the breaking up of the rigid caste system. Without these two key transformations advanced by Kerala's first Communist government, and later pushed through by the subsequent Left-wing state governments, the human and social conditions could not have improved as quickly as they did. Still, these two major reforms took many years to implement. While they were endorsed by the majority of the people through mass political movements followed by legitimate elections, they were also contested by political opponents. The rich landholders themselves foresaw not only the end of their aristocratic way of life but also of the culture itself with its classification of people according to caste and power in proportion to ownership of land. The sacrifice demanded of these people who were used to enjoying the power and honor which went with their status was enormous.

The Communists have been commended for bringing caste reform into the democratic struggle which has been "perhaps the most important contribution of the Communists in Kerala," according to a leading scholar of the left movement in Kerala. When they emphasized class in their struggle for social progress, the caste system became redundant. The Communists cut across all caste barriers by building up new class and mass organizations, thereby opening the doors to collaboration and social interaction between the castes. This started in the thirties when the caste associations joined the Communists in their work with the trade unions.

At that time, it was clear that the British would not make any attempts to reduce the social inequalities between the castes; on the contrary, they had
always given undue support to the upper-caste Brahmin landlords who dominated the agrarian society. As the workers on the plantations and in the rural-based industries, which had been built up by the British, began to identify with each other, they united into groups which again consolidated into their own class. The proximity of factories and farms to each other in such a small and densely populated state as Kerala mixed workers and peasants and helped build a common front. 4 United in force, they demanded better conditions and closer cooperation with their managers. Gradually, what had started as specific demands for improvements in their working and social conditions, developed into a political movement for independence combined with a renewed struggle against caste discriminations.

The Communist government addressed the main problem of redistribution of land immediately after gaining majority in the State Legislative Assembly in 1957. This included distribution of government-owned waste land to the landless peasants. Needless to say, the opposition was intense from the landholders who condemned the Land Reform Bill as a “direct challenge to the democratic ideals enshrined in the Constitution of India.” 5 It would take more than two decades before this Bill was passed and the enormous landholdings could be distributed among the tenant peasants against a low price paid to the former owners through the government. This not only freed the peasants from the grasp of the landlords--and the moneylenders, to whom they owed large amounts in rent and debt--and improved their economic condition, it also changed the social order in the village. A new equality in the economic and social status between the former dominant landholders and the new individual peasant landholders was established. These former landholders--the Nambootiris of the highest Hindu caste, and some high-caste
Nayars—who had been free to pursue intellectual studies and religious practices had also dominated the religious life of their community where their caste held the highest ritual ranking. By losing the bulk of their land, they also lost their religious dominance and, with that, social control in the village society. As one group—the peasant landholders—gained a new life of security, another group—the former large landowners—lost theirs. Some Keralites see this development more as a natural evolution of the historical process than as a result of the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act of 1969. 6

By transferring the ownership of land to the tillers, the Communist government helped improve agricultural production. Also by releasing the peasants from the burden of exorbitant rent in kind or money to the landholder and the moneylender, the peasants were no longer living under the threat of eviction. This new freedom enabled them to take part in political activities and join the crusade for social justice without the risk of penalty. The land reform measures taken in Kerala are regarded as the most sweeping and successful in South Asia. 7

The Left-wing state government introduced the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act in 1974 to improve the economic condition of the landless laborers. Despite much opposition and years of struggle, they have now obtained higher wages as well as unemployment insurance and pensions, albeit very small.

Kerala had not only poverty and a caste system to root out, it had to put an end to a deep-seated feudal system before any kind of equality of human well-being could be established. This has taken both time and pain, but it was to become one of the two most important of all reforms in Kerala where land was the source of all wealth and therefore of power.
Throughout its tenure, and the Communist government has had many long periods in power since 1957, its actions have been under constant scrutiny by the Indian National Congress. The minute the Communist government tried to force through measures which would not be approved for other states or were perceived as overstepping its power, the National Congress arranged to block its plans. As an example, even before its first election, the Communist party had expressed a plan to nationalize the foreign-owned plantations, but that plan was stopped immediately by the National Congress. Once in power, the new Communist government accepted this not wanting "to do anything beyond the Constitution" but at the same time leaving the door open for negotiations if necessary for future development plans. It was in the interest of the government to establish good relations with the capitalists as well as the workers. Industrial development was encouraged with the proviso that the workers got a fair share of the profits and the industrialists themselves accepted a reasonable profit, but it was never given any priority. In the end, only the Water Transport Corporation was nationalized.

With regard to economic growth, Kerala has not done well and its GNP is still very low. Hence Kerala has become an interesting example of a state with a low GNP while at the same time enjoying a high HDI (human development index), which is measured in the three basic indicators: longevity, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Since the GNP is an average of all the people, a country--or a state--with a group of exceptionally wealthy people will have a high GNP even though it can also have people living in economic and social backwardness. The ideal is, of course, to work towards raising the HDI and the GNP together, but this is not always possible, as we shall see in the case of Kerala.
Now, the only way to improve Kerala's economic base would be to develop its medium and large industries in the manufacturing sector. However, the state government seems to have neither the imagination nor the force to introduce new industrial policies, and the private industrial entrepreneurs are reluctant to take on the trade unions with their controlling mechanism. Another problem is that the young people's education is really designed for government jobs, which they prefer because it has more status and security, while a technical training would be more suitable for work in the industrial sector.

When the industrial sector was not given priority before, it was because the first government decided to give priority to the social sector, and there was neither the financial resources nor the technical expertise to do both. It was not until the end of the Fifth Five-Year Plan that industrial development was included and was to be directed by the state. However, since these projects have not turned out successfully, the state government is in the process of privatizing them.

If the industrial sector could be developed, this would also reduce the unemployment which has been a major problem for many years. In 1995, the unemployment rate had risen to twenty-five percent, but it was assumed to be even higher. At least 600,000 Keralites were working outside the state. About half of these, who were mostly Muslims, were in the Middle East countries. The remittances sent home from these expatriate workers amounted to more than ten percent of Kerala's budget. The export of such a large proportion of the work force, mostly young men of whom less than half had received a secondary education or acquired any specific skill, has proved to be disruptive to the traditions of family and community life at home. 9
Since unemployment now seems to be a vital issue in some of the Western economies, and the idea of globalization is winning ground, labor arrangements need to be improved to facilitate the exchange of skilled personnel between countries.

The Communist government ran into strong opposition from the Catholics and the landholders, with the conservative Congress party behind them, soon after its first election and was dismissed in 1959 by the Indian National Congress. Although this was a drastic measure, and a non-democratic action, central intervention was within the national law when peace and order were in jeopardy in a state. This dissolution of the first Communist government brought about what was to become a permanent change in the state's power structure. The Communist government had now realized that it must always keep within the national plans and that there were identifiable limits to demands for change. Negotiations and compromise would have to play a larger role in the political dialogue although this would cause delays and adjustments to the much-needed reforms. While the state government had always had the confidence of the poor workers, as well as many of the middle- and upper-class people, it had clearly made many enemies with its radical reforms of the caste system and the proposed Land Reform and Education Bills. With the latter it had antagonized especially the Catholic hierarchy who rejected the Communist materialistic ideology and, more specifically, any interference with the management of its schools. The proposed land reforms were revolutionary, and it was no wonder that the large landowners attacked the whole plan and the government which had proposed it.

The opposition to these plans also opened the state government up to other charges like corruption and favoritism and for showing disrespect for
the Constitution and democracy. None of these accusations could be proved but they introduced suspicion and ill-feeling among the people and became one of the main reasons for the government's dismissal. Additional accusations were made about cell courts, individuals in important public positions being tried by party officials. This was put down to overzealous new party members. Civil disobedience became an issue when the lower castes behaved according to the new rules of equality. For example, if a person from the unseeable caste did not get out of the road when a high-caste person approached, it was called civil disobedience. 10

The government was also charged with carrying on slanderous campaigns against non-Communist officials in their papers. The opposition itself, which ran the mass media except for the few Communist publications, gave the public a slanted view of the political picture. Pro-government demonstrations were minimized and anti-communist demonstrations exaggerated. Political opponents in alliance with the National Congress arranged for the arrest of activists without specific cause and manipulated food supplies. Police who were told to investigate anti-social crimes were called in to maintain law and order among the workers who were not afraid to strike or picket if they were dissatisfied with a management decision. In some extreme cases the police were known to have shot into the crowds, which included students, resulting in many deaths, which is normal practice for the police in India.

The political situation reached such a low point that the Indian National Congress finally stepped in and demanded new elections in an effort to safeguard the Constitution and democracy. This would reestablish majority rule and enforce the minority to accept it, as in a true democracy.

Around the time of this decision President Nehru, who had made a
recent visit to Kerala and was familiar with the problems but had been given a slanted view of the situation by members of the Congress party and through the press, wrote an article on “The Basic Approach” which was published in the All-India Congress Committee Economic Review. In this article he expressed his concern that because the Communist Party of India had its source in foreign ideology, the Communists were not intellectually independent enough to function completely in tune with the Indian culture. He was anxious that India remain Indian; if they all became Communists they would no longer be Indians. It was the quality of the human being within their own society which was important.

While Nehru preferred the Marxist economic system to capitalism, he believed that there was less need for Marxism in a democratic country and added that “democracy allied to capitalism had toned down many of its evils and has made capitalism develop some socialist features.” He also believed that communism was now identified with violence and described their approach as “wholly unscientific, unreasonable and uncivilized.” Change should be sought by “persuasion or peaceful democratic pressures.” In the end, Nehru believed that the Communist government had caused its own downfall by creating a feeling of insecurity in the state—not caused specifically by the two bills under fire as similar plans were being made in other states—and that the modern society with its new technology would introduce new ways to build the welfare society. 11

Since the dismissal of Kerala’s first Communist government, Kerala has had a series of different governments which have been led alternatively by the conservative Congress party or the United Left sometime in a coalition with other parties. In fact, this political game of musical chairs has
obstructed the development process, but it is a proof of the people's political freedom. And precisely because of this freedom and lack of censorship, there is every reason to believe that the Keralites will continue in their path of individual liberty and expression to find a democracy which will fit into their cultural values.

Preserving stability while promoting progress is a tough balancing act to follow for any government. The fact that the Communists—either alone as the United Left Front or in coalition with other small parties as the Left Democratic Front—have been voted back in on a regular basis, and that their voice is listened to in between, seems to indicate that a) their progressive programs for improving Kerala's human development have been effective, and that b) the Communist leaders have become less militant and more acceptable to the will of at least most of the people. With its excellent progress in human development, new social forces are coming forward and the democratic values which President Nehru prescribed will no doubt gain ground. Political participation has always been a dynamic force in Kerala. As the economy grows, and if the newly won equality between the classes does not regress, there should not be a need for radical measures. Once political stability has been established in Kerala, the path will be open to a democratic government with new plans for participatory economic expansion. Communism will become redundant there as it has in its birthplace.

In the Western world, we have been imbibed with the ideals of democracy born in the ancient Greek tradition. To us democracy stands for respect for majority rule by a free and competitive election. But our ideal of human rights applying to all the people is a new concept in public consciousness. While it has been buried deep in Christianity for two thousand years, it has
taken time to surface as a necessary tool in governing. It took several hundred years after feudalism had ended before democratic rule became the norm in the Western world with the United States of America becoming the first modern democratic state. Since then democracy has had many incarnations and variations of social and political equality all over the world. Some have evolved into purer forms of democracies—like Spain and Germany—after periods of fascist dictatorships. Other more recent democracies in Latin America and Africa are temporarily dominated by authoritarian rule. But the drive for democracy is a natural human need and part of the whole development process. So as also these countries progress in human and economic development, the people will demand change and their political leadership will realize that only a democratic rule will satisfy them. But we cannot expect fledgling democracies to become clones of the old Western ones. They will have to find a democratic model which can fit their own culture.

Now that the basic needs for the people's health, literacy and a modicum of material well-being have been established in Kerala, a second phase of development is under way with new targets and different challenges. Last year the newly created Kerala State Planning Board launched the People's Campaign for Ninth Plan to attack these new problems. Kerala's primary problems now are its crisis of power between the political affiliates, and the development of the industrial sector. In order for the industrial sector to improve, they have to deregulate the economy and facilitate the introduction of a new market mechanism which can fit into the social culture. But if the economic and political policies in Kerala continue to shift from left to right in a constant pendulum swing, all attempts to accomplish any new set of goals will be aborted. The people will lose confidence in any government and
moral commitment will suffer. Already the crime rate has increased and the suicide rate is three times the national average. 13

Democracy must be the most difficult form of government. It has to keep up a constant vigil against its enemies: ignorance, autocracy, economic monopoly, indifference, to mention a few. While a democratic government has to have a certain leveling mechanism, it also has to have enough vitality to stimulate new ideas and implement plans effectively. It has to have legitimate power to control and, at the same time, the people's consent to act. It has to have the determination of a bullock to follow through on its policies and the charm of a spring morning to capture the people's hope.
ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., 319.

3. Ibid., 313.


7. Franke and Chasin, 1.


11. Lieten, 154-57.


CONCLUSION

Kerala’s remarkable achievement in human development have invited both interest and respect in the international development community. It is especially interesting that Kerala has succeeded in ranking the highest among all Indian states in the three basic dimensions of human development --longevity, knowledge and a decent standard of living--despite its poverty. In only one generation these people have pulled themselves out of absolute poverty and established a quality of life unheard of thirty years earlier.

The people of Kerala found strength in their own traditions to change the most debilitating aspects of their society--feudalism and the most rigid caste system in India--before any real progress could be made.

With the constant influx of new people for centuries into this region, which is now the most densely populated state in India, the inhabitants learned to accept and respect people of different religions and customs. Over the years, they built up a sense of tolerance which has helped them become good communicators who form easily into groups and associations.

This society, with the many different religious traditions of moral responsibility combined with a respect for human dignity, produced some great leaders whose dedication inspired the people to form popular movements with the intent to reform their society.

Kerala’s successful human and social development is also a result of its traditionally keen interest in education. Much of the credit for this is due to the large proportion of educated women, especially the Nayar women who, with their tradition of independence and education early on, led the way for the women to play a decisive role in the many improvements of the social...
sector. Mass education from 1912 contributed to raising the consciousness of all the people.

When a Communist government was elected as Kerala's first state government, it had the backing of an educated populace which was motivated and able to change the state's social structure. The first radical reforms, which consisted of breaking down the caste system and putting an end to feudalism, were mutually reinforcing. The land reforms also freed the peasants to become politically involved without fear of losing their livelihood. Through the many associations and unions, which cut across the caste barriers, the poor people united into one class and discovered a new empowerment which they used to improve their benefits.

Concern for health care goes far back in Kerala's history. With improved technology and widespread literacy, especially among the women, major improvements in public health were now possible. Although it took significant resources to reach the achievements we have observed, the health sector was considered a priority in this state, and considerable resources were therefore allocated to this and to the education sector, all at the expense of the industrial sector. Since Kerala did not develop its industrial base, the state's economic growth has suffered, and its income level remains low.

There are many lessons to be learned from Kerala's development experience in our modern times. While it has its roots in Kerala's unique history of a multi-religious society, it confirms the cardinal importance of education. For education to play such an important role, it is not enough to have advanced education for the few. There must be a good basic education for all the people. With the skills and confidence acquired through education, the people are able to participate in public life. Once they can participate in
public life, they have a 'voice' and can change their own social and economic situation. For only the poor themselves can be the instrumental force in improving their own situation.

Another important lesson would be that the worse the social and economic situation is, the more radical reforms are necessary. Kerala was a region which had not followed the democratic evolution of the times. It had stagnated in the age of feudalism and caste discrimination. Through a democratic electoral process, the Communist government led the people out of this intolerable situation. Being a state government, it had to defer to the supreme authority of the democratic national government which was committed to maintaining Kerala’s basic democratic liberties. It was not an easy process of change, and it could not have been done without the strong popular movements. But together they did it in one generation and laid the cornerstone for a new tradition of expanded public services for all the people.
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