

# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



### **Floods a nimitham to Building Back Better?**

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## Floods – a *nimitham* to Building Back Better?

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How we in Kerala commit ourselves to ‘Build Back Better’ (BBB) – to use the coinage popularised by former United States President Bill Clinton when he visited Aceh Province, Indonesia in 2006 as the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery– depends a lot on how we envision and negotiate the rebuilding and redevelopment process.

There is a distinction between rebuilding and redevelopment.

Build Back Better (BBB) signifies more than rebuilding better. It points to a re-development process which envisions resilient, sustainable, and efficient solutions using the context of disaster to re-envision a change in the composition, pace and direction of the development process.

For us in Kerala BBB will certainly imply this and more.

In Kerala, our settlement patterns, our food grains, our cash crops, our tourism, our power sources, our fisheries, our access to fresh water – to name but a few essential attributes which make us “Kerala” -- all arise innately from the special geo-physical contours of the state.

The recent floods have brought to fore the need for us -- the state and civil society – to utilise the opportunity provided by the deluge, to redevelop and re-envision how we as a community situate ourselves within the context of our salubrious natural environment.

In the context of global climate change, if we do not wish to be confronted with another deluge in a generation, we need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, ‘deep ecological activism’ for conserving nature, and on the other a BBB process that, *inter alia*, negotiates a well-planned reconstruction of our habitations, a changed attitude to dams, a new look at our cash crop agriculture and our tourism, a willingness not to disturb the sand in the river beds, and an agreement to leave the beaches as playgrounds for the sea.

Such a BBB process cannot be organised as a top-down state-led initiative – however well-meaning and sincere that may be.

By its very definition a BBB must result in a part fixed, part flexible physical master plan which is the result of a judicious amalgamation of participatory ward/panchayat level physical rehabilitation and reconstruction plans with each one providing a vision statement of how they wish to see the redevelopment of their ward/panchayat. This amalgam must then be meshed with macro assessments of reconstruction needs, undertaken by appropriate government departments, which have taken seriously the geo-physical and environmental factors in nature that have exposed themselves to us in the wake of the deluge.

Specific redevelopment projects can then be piloted based on these combined initiatives. These can be financed by private firms, cooperatives and other sources. In short, for a BBB process, we must aim towards creating a range of new public-private-people partnerships.

Also, given the outpouring of financial support for rebuilding Kerala from all manner of sources, a BBB process must be fully transparent.

In Kerala today, we have the power of the ubiquitous smartphone where literally every citizen can take a photo of damage or progress of restoration and upload the same to social media networks. With talented IT personnel, equipped with the technology of open source and motivated with open hearts, we have the singular possibility, for example, of being able to make a one-to-one match between a donation from a Keralite in UAE with the specific reconstruction needs of a village, a section of people or a special cause of her choice on a real-time basis.

Such twinning of aid to need and the resulting transparency and accountability it offers to both donor and recipient, at almost zero marginal costs, must be utilised to the fullest. This will make individuals and institutional donors – small and big – to trust that their resources are being well spent and achieving the desired ends. The result is more aid.

Effective coordination of plans, funds and implementation – the key in any redevelopment effort -- is best achieved if there is a separately designated, time-bound and focused entity which is set up for this purpose. This body must have the sanction of the legislature and be accountable to it, but with the freedom to function according to the highest professional and ethical standards.

In Malayalam we use the word '*nimitham*' to refer to happenings or events, which in hindsight can be interpreted as momentous turning points which happened at the right time – usually leading towards more desirable state of affairs.

Will the recent deluge in Kerala-- and related crisis and disasters – be a *nimitham* to Build Back Better?

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