

Building a New Kerala

Ideas and Reflections



Revive People's Power in the Rebuilding

M.P.Parameswaran

Research Unit on Local Self Governments
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Kerala has faced the worst natural disaster of recent times, in the form of devastating floods and very heavy monsoon rain in August 2018. Though the loss of life in the floods was thankfully contained by the quick and coordinated action of the state government functionaries, different sections of civil society, notably the fisher people, and the army, the extent of material damage is unprecedented, and many people lost all material possessions. The full extent of the damage to the ecology is only beginning to reveal itself: for example, in groundwater levels falling extraordinarily, probably related to the enormous loss of the top-soil during the flooding. Nevertheless, the magnificent display of public spirit during the rescue and relief phases gives much hope about the new possibilities of rehabilitation and reconstruction, of building back better.

This reminds us of the legacy of people's movements in the state, in the mass participation of people in Kerala's development – from the Total Literacy campaign to the People's Planning Campaign of the 1990s. Kerala has shown, over these years and now, what it is capable of. This spirit should not be lost; it must be preserved and fostered. It is clear that we must not let anything divide us – caste, religion, or even politics.

It is important to recognize the seriousness of the moment. There is a good reason to think that the devastating monsoon of 2018 is a climate-change event, a result of global warming. Global warming is related to the ever-increasing use of energy, which is, of course, related to the very logic of capitalism that generates never-ending needs in its drive for incessant production. The developed countries are primarily responsible for this.

However, let us not ignore the fact that the upper and middle classes in Kerala have been lately in a contest to imitate the consumption of the developed first-world. Take, for instance, the nature of house construction. Members of these classes, especially the globally-mobile and transnational sections of these, build palatial apartments and villas, which are, however, mostly unused. The materials used and the construction of a 2,000 square foot apartment involves expenditure of energy equivalent to 200,000 units of electricity. This means that the responsibility for exacerbating global warming is not entirely external to Kerala: indeed, it shows that we have also contributed to it. And the sheer irrationality of this construction seems to be revealed when we consider that nearly 15 lakhs of such houses are uninhabited, while nearly 5 lakh families in Kerala do not possess a dwelling of their own. This has, further, led to

the destruction of ecologically-vital features: stone-quarries supplying the construction sector operate recklessly in ecologically-fragile areas, paddy-lands are filled, hillocks levelled, and river-beds mined ruthlessly for sand and clay. This gluttonous consumption, by the rich, is the single most important factor in the acceleration of environmental destruction in Kerala. It is they who introduced the culture of compound-wall building which has blocked natural drainage; nature has taken revenge by smashing them. Much construction that services the needs of the upper and middle classes, especially roads etc. did not care to respect the natural paths through which flowing water drained and hence took the toll. The other major source of destruction has been the terrible landslides in the hilly areas that took many lives as well. Small farmers driven up the high hill-slopes have paid a huge price in the landslides and flash floods. In sum, unscientific, greed-driven development fuelled by the avarice of the rich and bolstered by the muscle-power of the many mafias have brought us to this tragedy.

The only force that can stop this slide towards total disaster is the power of the people. People must demand.

- People should demand that the permanently unoccupied dwellings be requisitioned by the government on lease or purchased and be given to the homeless on long-term lease.
- People should demand a blanket prohibition on conversion of wetlands to garden lands.
- People should demand legislation that no usable dwelling shall be demolished.
- People should demand for stricter regulation on real estate and construction industry. Land is a means of production and a manufactured commodity for sale.
- People should demand a restriction on the number of dwellings that a family can own. A nuclear family should not be allowed to own more than one.
- People should appeal to those who lost compound wall due to flood shall not rebuild them, but instead resort to bio-fencing which has multiple benefits.
- People should demand to the government that it should learn the lesson from the breached roads and bunds -- that while re-building them care should be taken to respect flowing water, that re-building shall not be doing the same things again.

The government of Kerala has promised us a New Kerala post-disaster – a new society. Needless to say, such a society has to be bottoms-up. In other words, it must rest on our local self-government, and planning must be reactivated from every panchayat and every town. Our LSG institutions need to be rejuvenated in such a way that every citizen is involved. Right up from the neighbourhood groups, the Panchayat Development Committee, the Technical

Support Group, the Grama Sabhas – all of which were active in many LSGs in the early days, during the People’s Planning Campaign – must be re-energized. Besides, the newer institutions like the Haritha Karma Sena and Green Technology Centres under the Green Kerala Mission are to be activated and made operational. To provide livelihood for the unemployed poor, labour societies can be formed and all the neighbourhood groups could decide collectively to cultivate all fallow/ semi-fallow lands. The wages for this can be drawn from MNREG funds. Technical Support Groups could be constituted from all professionals available within the area, and it could function as an LSG-level Planning Board tasked with preparing local level plans for reconstruction, with the help of outside experts where ever necessary. needless to say, these initiatives should spring from the local. The State Government shall not make local level plans, but only make available resources and provide for a People’s Auditing Team elected by the neighbourhoods.

In sum, the key to re-emerging stronger from this challenge lies in rebuilding and reviving people’s power and their agency to shape development in ways that are mindful of ecology and free from avaricious consumption.

[Dr M P Parameswaran is a long-time activist of the People’s Science Movement in Kerala, the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat]



Research Unit on Local Self Governments
Centre for Development Studies

Prasanth Nagar, Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram - 695011, Kerala, India
Tel: +91-471- 2774200, 2448881, 2448412 Fax: +91-471- 2447137
www.cds.edu