

# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



### **New Foundations for the Mind: Rebuilding Intelligence in Post-Disaster Kerala**

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**New Foundations for the Mind:****Rebuilding Intelligence in Post-Disaster Kerala****J. Devika**

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In Kerala before the August 2018 disaster and even after, the intelligence we value most as a society has been, without a doubt academic intelligence, rooted in the ability to reason. The excessive weight given to academic performance and the tendency to treat it as the ultimate test of a young person's thinking capacities has indeed done much harm and this is now widely discussed in the context of the growing evidence of mental distress and illness among our young. There is also limited discussion in Kerala about social and emotional intelligence as necessary correctives to balance the stress on academic intelligence. During the landslides and floods of 2018, much newspaper reporting praised the efficiency, coordination, and intelligence with which the most ordinary young people handled difficult tasks during rescue and relief – all indicate that despite the near-universal and almost-coercive demand for academic intelligence that most young people in Kerala encounter, their ability to relate to other human beings and coordinate with each other, as well as respond to orders creatively and without slavishness, had not ceased to develop.

Besides this insight, young people's response to the common danger also brought to our attention the limitations of associating the idea of intelligence primarily with individuals. This is unsurprising: hitherto, the idea of the 'intelligence' was, after all, linked to individual academic performance. Yet what seemed vital for our survival during the disaster was a collective intelligence – present in/as a group. Evolutionary anthropology points out today that such collective intelligence was indeed one of the key reasons for our survival as a species in the early, very insecure, days of human evolution – for example, social intelligence that helped us collaborate for basic survival on a daily and generational basis. However, this insight has always received only a backseat in our policies, and that was perhaps to be expected because the neoliberal policy frameworks that have informed our social and welfare policies were increasingly driven by the idea that the collective is nothing more than the aggregate of its individual members. Hence most of these have been deeply individualizing –

prompting individual households and individuals to pursue their individual interest at the cost of what may be common to all. Ecology was indeed the greatest casualty in this speeding up of individualizing policy.

We now have arrived at a time in which survival, once again, is an issue, and collective intelligence seems all-important. Further, it seems that inculcating ecological intelligence acquires an unprecedented significance since it is now widely accepted that August 2018 might not be a freak, once-in-a-century occurrence, but a more frequent experience in the wake of global climate change.

Below, we lay out what ‘ecological intelligence’ means, and then reflect on the ways in which it could be inculcated in our society. This entails taking the insights of environmental psychology about climate change denial around the world and setting aside the idea that the Malayali denial of the reality and the impacts of environmental destruction and ecological damage are purely explainable through rational-choice models of human behaviour. Instead, we need to seek ways of disarming the various defence mechanisms through which such denial is perpetuated in order to enable the translation of ecological awareness into eco-friendly action, especially consumption. ‘Ecological intelligence’, thus, would be integral to the citizen of New Kerala, if it is to be new at all.

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David Goleman, the psychologist who advanced the concept of ecological intelligence, defines it as “the collective ability to understand the human impact on ecosystems and to act in ways that improve them.” (2009). Elaborating on this formulation [elsewhere](#)<sup>1</sup>, he writes that it was developed in response to the idea of the Anthropocene age, in which biogeochemical systems which are the foundations of life are being destroyed by human beings. He advances this idea to explain how the human race survived excruciating conditions in early evolution: “It struck me that in order to have survived, any human group needed to understand and have an exquisite attunement to its local ecosystem. This is what ecological intelligence is. It's the way native peoples everywhere have survived, wherever they lived, whether the desert or the tundra. And with the Industrial Revolution, we began a huge disconnect between what sustains us and its origins. We have only the vaguest idea what transpired in order for us to get the things that we now depend on to live. And so

there has been an enormous, species-wide de-skilling in ecological intelligence, and to our detriment.”

Goleman insists that ecological intelligence can only be collective – never individual. We all have the capacity for ecological intelligence, he says, which is, however, heavily stunted because of the disconnected education system. [In another essay](#)<sup>2</sup>, he argues: “Psychologists conventionally view intelligence as residing within an individual. But the ecological abilities we need in order to survive today must be a collective intelligence, one that we learn and master as a species, and that resides in a distributed fashion among far-flung networks of people. The challenges we face are too varied, too subtle, and too complicated to be understood and overcome by a single person; their recognition and solution require intense efforts by a vastly diverse range of experts, businesspeople, activists – by all of us. As a group we need to learn what dangers we face, what their causes are, and how to render them harmless, on the one hand, and, on the other, to see the new opportunities these solutions offer – and we need the collective determination to do all this..... Ecological intelligence allows us to comprehend systems in all their complexity, as well as the interplay between the natural and man-made worlds. But that understanding demands a vast store of knowledge, one so huge that no single brain can store it all. Each one of us needs the help of others to navigate the complexities of ecological intelligence. We need to collaborate.”

In Kerala’s context, the first step towards ecological intelligence may involve generating a deep awareness, and appreciation of, the physical nature of Kerala itself. The need for this is evident, for example, in some recent research into environmental destruction-denial in Eloor (Devika et al. 2018), it appeared that after the construction of several bridges that connect Eloor to the mainland over the past thirty years, there is a loss, among local leaders (and among much of the public there), of the sense that Eloor is a small island surrounded by water. Loss of the awareness of living in ecologically-fragile land leads to completely unsustainable practices, which are further bolstered by psychic defence mechanisms of denial. For instance, the arrival of ‘risk society’ (i.e. society in which the aim is no longer ‘unending progress’ but intelligent adaption to human-made risk), it is argued, means increased perception of death-risk in individuals, and this strengthens distal

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defences, one form of which may be an irrational siding with the dominant view even when all evidence shows that is unsustainable and possibly dangerous.

The second step would be to revise the dominant liberal notion of collective interest in Kerala, which is decidedly neoliberal and deeply individualizing. Existing collectivities, therefore, need to be reimagined urgently in creative ways that reposition them in a shared ecological world that rejects the dichotomy between nature and human society – starting from basic units like the family and the self-help-group, right up to the social whole itself. The salience of both cultural units, such as the family and caste- or religious communities, as well as developmental units such as the self-help group or the neighbour-hood group, need to be reexamined in ecological terms – and even though it may sound utopian, they need to be reinvented as collectivities capable of housing deep ecological intelligence.

This is not a short-term project, but a necessarily long-term, perhaps permanently ongoing one. It will need us to mobilize the vast educational sector, cutting across the public-private and technical-non-technical divide, to fulfil. And importantly it should form the backbone of a renewed effort to tackle the broader mental health challenges that ecologically-unsustainable society has produced (of which environment-destruction denial is one), much of which has been accentuated by the August 2018 calamity.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/do-we-need-more-ecological-intelligence>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/ecological-intelligence>

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