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# STATE AND SOCIETY RELATIONSHIPS IN INDIA

## *Explaining the Kerala Experience*

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Gemma Cairó

It is unusual to find experiments on human and social development in developing countries. However, an exception is to be found in the Indian state of Kerala. This interaction, referred to as the Kerala model, allows connections to be made between high levels of human development and the political and social forces at work in society. Numerous scholars have studied the Kerala model in an attempt to identify what lies at the heart of the Kerala experience and determine the sustainability of the model. The first strand of literature seeks to use the model in order to explain the achievements of this Indian state in the fields of education and health. The second strand attempts to analyze the increasing inability of the state to meet its fiscal deficits and the consequent danger to social development associated with the maintenance of this model. For a better understanding of the Kerala model it is necessary to explain what lies behind the Kerala experience.

The main aim of this article is thus to link the Kerala model to the nature of the state of Kerala and its social characteristics. It is assumed here that only by taking into account the state-society relationships in the context of the Indian state of Kerala will it be possible to comprehend the essence of the Kerala experience. At the same time, this project can provide some useful background for assessing the future prospects in developing countries. The theoretical approach for this analysis will be based on a consideration of the

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peripheral capitalist state's roles in the process of capital accumulation and especially in both resource mobilization and the development of its distributive functions. The analysis will also take into consideration the fact that both economic and non-economic forces in general can influence these state-developed functions. In the case of Kerala, this implies that the present study will focus on how the state's different social groups were able to influence and pressure the state in order to fulfill their own interests, and the ways that this in turn produced Kerala's distributive model. By these means, I hope to be able to explain not only how the state has achieved its high level of human development, but also how the continuing trade-off between distribution and growth has been unleashed and settled in the Kerala economy. The state's unique experience will also show the specificity of the process of social change the local society has faced, one that has been marked by a transformation in the social consciousness of the Kerala population in their historical development.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section embraces the two points mentioned above. State-society relations provide the general framework for this essay, including the role of the capitalist state in developing countries and the main features of the Kerala experience. In the second section I will analyze the social and political factors that have led to the Kerala model. The third section will conclude by linking state-society relationships in Kerala with the achievements this society has reached in the sphere of human development.

### The General Framework: The State and Economic Interests

To define and characterize the kind of state-society relationships that exist in Kerala it is necessary to recall the main features and functions of the state in developing societies. Illustrating the features of the peripheral state will make it possible to introduce both the degree of state autonomy in relation to class interests represented in the political sphere and the nature of state-society relationships. It is important to note that as the historical process has passed these developing countries by, they have experienced capitalist penetration and the incarnation of the modern state. As a result, the state's role in these countries has acquired some particularities that tend to make it different from the typical state in developed countries. The point of departure for a theoretical approach to the state's role in developing countries is the mutual interdependence in any social formation between the economic structure (defined by the relations of production, distribution, and consumption) and non-economic institutions (i.e., the realm where the state is located and the cultural and ideological aspects are reflected). In considering this, it is assumed that the peripheral and post-colonial capitalist state will adopt differentiated

functions and have dynamics that are not the same as those seen in the state in developed countries. The developing society state today faces a complex socioeconomic and political reality; the process of social change from tradition to modernity that these societies are experiencing not only remains unparalleled but also subject to disruption and distortion.

Many features are held to typify the state in developing countries. I posit the main ones as being: (a) the close relationship between underdeveloped capitalism and the state in the process of capital accumulation; (b) the linkage between political and economic power, which shapes the state as a source of economic power; (c) democracy that comes from above with a low level of organization and mobilization of the society, as indicated in the well-known contribution of Gunnar Myrdal on “soft states” in developing countries, particularly in the case of South Asia; (d) an “overdeveloped state,” in Hamza Alavi’s description; and (e) the heterogeneity of dominant classes represented in the state, with interests that are often in conflict.

These theoretical considerations are important to understand the specificity of the state in developing countries. Undoubtedly, the state’s role in the formation of the economic base and its consequent contribution to the process of class formation and class realignments has affected the relationships between the state and economic interests, as well as the role of the state in the process of capital accumulation and resource mobilization. This in turn will inevitably affect the state’s choice of strategy for economic development and growth and its relative autonomy from dominant economic interests.

The above-mentioned specificities of the state in developing societies arise not only from the economic functions the state performs but also from the social, cultural, and political particularities of developing societies that are rooted in their process of social transformation. One must therefore assess state-society relationships—and the degree of state autonomy—from a more interdisciplinary and less determinist perspective than has often been the case in standard literature. While rejecting both the instrumentalist and functionalist approaches to the state, it is necessary to consider one’s theoretical approach to the concept of the state’s autonomy from the perspective of class analysis. It should also be done with reference to other specific sociohistorical factors that are relevant to developing societies.

Applying the former perspective would call for a class analysis based on the heterogeneity of dominant classes represented in the state. In this view, the state appears as an arena of conflict of class interests rather than the instrument of the bourgeoisie. In the latter perspective, the autonomy of the state can also be explained by what Samir Amin called “other social realities,” namely linguistic differences, ethnic conflict, religious configurations, or caste structure, among others. All these factors are translated into social and economic claims that put pressure on the state and compel it to accom-

modate these demands in order to achieve its own stability. Thus, the state cannot be identified as a simple tool of the dominant classes and therefore has to develop the legitimacy and stability that confer upon it a degree of autonomy.

Following on the above analyses, one can assert that the state becomes not only the arena for conflict among the dominant classes, but also the sociopolitical expression of a historical and concrete social reality. This redefinition of the notion of the state's relative autonomy does not deny the class character of the capitalist state. The state continues to operate under the economic logic of capitalism in favoring the interests of dominant classes, which often is to the detriment of the whole population of developing countries. Furthermore, this stance also offers the possibility to analyze the constraints faced by the state in assuming its developmental role. Having some kind or degree of autonomy does not necessarily mean the state will be able to fulfill that role as it will try to solve the distributive conflicts that arise from interclass disputes. This double perspective on the relative autonomy of the state can be described as, in Sudipta Kaviraj's words, making a distinction between "dominance" and "governance" aimed at understanding "how the logic of politics intersects the logic of the economy."<sup>1</sup> In spite of refusing the notion of relative autonomy, Bob Jessop's arguments about the capacity of the state for independent action are also enlightening here; he states that the real question is "to assess the relative weight of different institutions and social forces in determining specific outcomes in a complex, changing conjuncture."<sup>2</sup>

Some divergences arise when relating this notion of state autonomy to the Indian experience and the Kerala case. The Indian state has been able to perform some of its functions autonomously, such as the implementation of an industrialization strategy under the logic of state capitalism, although the role of resource mobilization has been constrained by the interests of the "dominant coalition."<sup>3</sup> But the Indian state was faced not only with those dominant forces but also with governance pressures coming from different social groups organized along caste, religious, and regional lines.

Although both sets of forces have influenced state policies, one can see from the kind of economic development strategy India has followed since independence that the Indian state has displayed a pronounced class-oriented character in that it has been heavily committed to dominant economic inter-

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1. Sudipta Kaviraj, "A Critique of the Passive Revolution," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 45-47 (1988), p. 2431.

2. Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 103.

3. This expression was used by Pranab Bardhan to characterize the Indian dominant coalition formed by the industrial capitalist class, rich farmers, and professionals. See Pranab Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

ests. As shall be demonstrated later, unlike that of India as a whole, the case of Kerala demonstrates how the state has been able to isolate dominant class interests even though it has also been trapped in a distributive conflict. Furthermore, the state has been able to respond positively to demands made by organized and mobilized groups in the society—both subjected and non-subjected. The logic of the state, forced by articulated interests, has therefore been marked by governance considerations. In turn, it has somewhat constrained its accumulation role. Thus, as will be analyzed later, the state-society relationship that has been developed in Kerala has produced a distributive model of development.

### Kerala's Distributive Model

The Kerala model is typified by the achievement of a high level of human development and the improvement of living conditions for most of its population. This was accomplished through the creation of a distributive, equality-based strategy oriented toward social welfare focused on the fundamental areas of health, education, and the reduction of poverty. Kerala's backwardness and the stagnation of its economy since the 1970s have not prevented its government from formulating social development policy measures intended to nurture the capabilities of and generate entitlements for the population. This has transformed the average Keralites' ability to develop themselves in society. The high level of human development achieved in Kerala can be observed by the outcomes in the education sphere, health conditions, and the process of demographic mobility, all of which are above the Indian average and that of most developing countries (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, the improvements in the health level have been translated into a high life expectancy for Keralites—around 71 years—and a relatively low rate of infant mortality. These indicators reflect an active policy of expanding medical assistance and improving health services. Undoubtedly, this success has been helped by the population's educational level, reflected in a 90% literacy rate that in turn is far beyond figures for the Indian average, showing that almost half of the population is illiterate. The role of public policy related to the development of the education system has also been crucial, in spite of the communal interests behind the expansion of educational facilities. As for poverty alleviation measures, they have consisted basically of ones aimed at the expansion and management of the Public Distribution System (intended to meet the population's minimum nutritional requirements) and the development of social assistance schemes.

In spite of the above, 20%–25% of the population are still believed to remain below the poverty line. This number has increased in recent years. The Planning Commission's (PC) survey of the Kerala population showed that 16.4% were below the poverty line in 1987–88. An estimation based on

TABLE 1 *Social and Economic Indicators of Kerala and India*

	<i>Kerala</i>	<i>India</i>
Life expectancy (years) (1991–95)	72.9	60.3
Infant mortality rate* (1998)	16	72
Birth rate* (1998)	18.2	26.4
Death rate* (1998)	9	6.4
Literacy rate (%) (1991)	89.8	52.2
Human Development Index (1987)	0.651	0.439
Gender Development Index (1996)	0.597	0.410
Human Poverty Index (1997) (%)	15	37
Per capita income** (Rs.) (1997–98)	11,936	12,729
Monthly per capita consumer expenditure (Rs.) (1991)	370	306

SOURCES: Government of Kerala, *Economic Review*, 1995; Government of India, *Economic Survey 1999–2000*; Shiva Kumar, A. K., “UNDP’s Human Development Index: A Computation for Indian States”; UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1996.

\* Per 1,000 population.

\*\*Kerala (per capita net state domestic product at current prices) and India (per capita net national product at current prices)

that made by Mahendra Dev and colleagues that was adjusted by the agricultural laborers consumption prices index produced a figure of 20%. In 1993, the Planning Commission Expert Committee on Poverty revised the PC figure by introducing specific poverty lines for each Indian state. Its estimation of the share of Kerala population living below the poverty line was 24.4%.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, such data show that a considerable proportion of Kerala’s people are living in conditions of economic poverty. It should be noted, however, that economic poverty is different from human poverty, despite the fact that all these estimations on poverty introduce multiple problems.

Probably one of the most important achievements of Kerala’s development process has been the reduction of inequalities, both of gender—especially in terms of the social indicators such as health and education—and between and among different regions including the urban-rural divide. Efforts in these areas have produced a high Human Development Index (0.651) ranking in relation to the rest of India and most developing countries. The state accomplished this in spite of a low per capita income that put it 12th in a representative ranking of 17 Indian states.<sup>5</sup>

4. M. Mohandas, “Paradox of High Poverty and High PQLI in Kerala, Facts and Fallacies,” paper presented at the International Congress on Kerala Studies, Trivandrum, 1994; and K. P. Kannan, “Public Intervention and Poverty Alleviation,” paper presented at *ibid*.

5. A. K. Shiva Kumar, “UNDP’s Human Development Index: A Computation for Indian States,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 41 (1991), pp. 2343–2345.

The social priorities marked by the state government's public policy have led to a pattern of public spending heavily focused on current expenditure. The Kerala model has been financed and supported by public resource allocation on education and health items both in terms of plan and non-plan expenditure. This pattern has led to continuous fiscal deficits, with increasing debt servicing and a consequent lack of resources for investment in productive sectors. Such problems aside, it does explain Kerala's social development experience. The state government has recognized the fiscal crisis and its causes:

[T]he overall revenue deficit of the state is largely due to the deficit on non-plan revenue account. . . . [Thus,] the inability of the state government to generate budgetary savings has been a major factor for its low rate of plan investment and low rate of economic growth. The unbridled increase in non-plan expenditure has been the main reason for the difficult resource position of the state government.<sup>6</sup>

Several factors such as the narrow economic base and the decreasing level of central government transfers have affected the state government's ability to raise current receipts. However, the most outstanding factor has been the state's low level of economic growth. It has been partly offset by migrant remittances coming from Kerala workers in the Gulf, which has allowed the maintenance of high levels of consumption.

As noted earlier, Kerala's economic performance has been characterized by stagnation and low levels of economic activity. Since the 1970s, per capita income has been low and unemployment has been on the rise. The growth rate of state product for the period 1961–86 was 2.7%—for 1975–86 it was only 1.7%—but since the mid-1980s economic growth has accelerated somewhat.<sup>7</sup> This reality should be linked to the state's economic structure, which is typified by disjointment among economic sectors (non-sector links or non-sector articulation) and external dependence. This peripheral structure is translated into the economic backwardness seen in such features as an export-oriented agriculture based on primary products, a disjointed industrial structure lacking links between productive sectors and dominated by low levels of value-added to Kerala industries, and the overdevelopment of the tertiary sector.

As a result, Kerala's economy has been incapable of generating an endogenous and autonomous model of accumulation of capital. Although migrant remittances have alleviated the low level of income, this has not generated the productive allocation of these resources as they have been channeled mainly into personal consumption. In fact, it has been asserted in reference

6. Government of Kerala, *Economic Review 1991* (Trivandrum: State Planning Board, 1993).

7. Government of Kerala, *Economic Review 1995*, *ibid.*, 1997.



to these remittances that "they have tended to reinforce the pre-existing structures of underdevelopment rather than break them down."<sup>8</sup>

Finally and most significantly, public expenditure patterns have not been addressed seriously and coherently with the goal of transforming the economic structure by capital investment into infrastructure and technical development. This shows the state's inability to assume its role in the process of capital accumulation. While it is not the objective of this article to elucidate the causes of economic performance and backwardness, it is necessary to point out that the low rate of economic growth appears to be the main threat to maintaining the Kerala model. It is clear that capital accumulation becomes a necessary condition to complete the sustainability of the social development model.

The Kerala model can thus be defined as unfinished or transitional to the extent that it cannot guarantee its maintenance in the long term. In fact the state, faced with the need to accelerate economic growth, has proposed some changes in policy guidelines such as macroeconomic stability, containment of fiscal deficit, control of major subsidies, and the embrace of liberalization principles under central government and IMF structural adjustment. Specifically, the state proposes "changes in legislative and administrative framework to facilitate restructuring of industry, elimination of rigidity in labor laws, attracting direct foreign investment, phasing out import licensing and high tariffs, shifting the composition of external finance from borrowing to direct equity investment, prudent management of external debt and foreign exchange reserves, reforms in pricing, cost recovery and institutional changes in infrastructure."<sup>9</sup> After all, and in spite of Kerala's unique human development experience, it is impossible to untie the state's economic development from India's economic strategy and the dynamics of the world economy.

## Forces and Factors Shaping the Kerala Model

Kerala's experience has shown how collective action can be translated into the organization of various social groups and the articulation of their demands aimed at the fulfillment of their respective economic, social, and political interests. This process of public action has developed in a gradual and progressive way and can be explained by sociocultural, political, and economic causes, some of which date back to the 19th century. So the particular

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8. T. M. Thomas Isaac, "Economic Consequences of Gulf Crisis: A Study of India with Special Reference to Kerala." In P. Wickramasekara, ed., *The Gulf Crisis and South Asia: Economic Impact* (New Delhi: United Nations Development Program/International Labor Organization, 1993), p. 84.

9. Government of Kerala, *Economic Review 1993* (Trivandrum: State Planning Board, 1995).

features of Kerala society—such as its high degree of social fragmentation along caste, class, and religious lines—have made their mark on the historical process of social transformation.

The rigid caste structure that characterizes Kerala society favored the development of caste movements during the second half of the 19th century. These represented the beginning of the struggle against the system of oppression and domination from which most of the population suffered. This earlier pattern of social mobilization established the basis for the later emergence of workers' associations fighting for their rights. This latter development was boosted by the nature of capitalist penetration in Kerala, which caused the rapid proletarianization of workers, and also by the existence of the communist party that decidedly influenced the organization of farmers and workers.

All these processes have led to the transformation of social consciousness. This has produced both a progressive weakening of traditional caste ties in social relationships and the adoption of new organization patterns by different social groups in order to articulate their claims directed to the state. At the same time, in the political sphere the Marxist communists—whether or not established in power—have shown a political will and commitment to try to change the status quo. These factors have affected state-society relationships and in turn the kind of development strategy the state has pursued.

### *Caste Movements and Erosion of Traditional Order*

The first step in the weakening of the state's traditional caste-based social system came under the colonial system. Challenges to the stability of the old system also came from within the caste structure. The emergence of caste movements led to the mobilization of low castes. Such movements could first be seen in the religious field; they later spread their claims to greater access to social status and political power. Social, historical, and cultural factors encouraged the emergence not only of caste movements among different Hindu communities—like the low caste Ezhavas or high-middle caste Nairs—but also the mobilization of such non-Hindu communities as Christians and Muslims.

There are some common features to all caste movements that emerged in Kerala during the second half of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century. I will briefly analyze them here. There are two caste associations that can be linked to caste movements during this period: the Ezhava movement, which developed under the umbrella organization of the Sree Narayanan Dharma Paripala (SNDP); and the Nair movement, which was centered upon the Nair Social Service (NSS).

The Ezhava social movement was founded by the charismatic leader, Sree Narayana Guru. His philosophy can be summarized by his famous sentence: “one caste, one religion, one God.” His philosophy tried to remove any dis-

crimination. His teaching was focused on the need for Ezhava people to achieve consciousness of the inequalities that they were suffering. To obtain such, it was necessary to increase their education level in order to release them from “evils, ignorance, and superstition.”<sup>10</sup> This was especially important because of the grievances that existed among not only different castes but also within the Ezhava community. Sree Narayana Guru's ideas inspired other caste movements in Kerala, both among the lower—as is the case of Pulayas—and higher Hindu castes.

The powerful attack of the caste movements on the symbolic social order was important at first. In a society ideologically marked by the production of symbols of inequality, opposition, and domination, these elements were a logical starting point to be challenged by caste movements. This is particularly important because the symbolic order with its attached “imaginary” elements—such as the “imaginary power” of one group over another immediately below it—served to legitimize the social order.<sup>11</sup>

The Ezhava movement's first action was to fight against the prohibition against free entry to temples by lower castes. The importance of this action lay in its confrontation of the domination of the high caste Brahmin community. The process of “Sanskritization” practiced by lower castes accompanied temple entry. The concept of Sanskritization should not be understood as a simple act of imitation. Instead, it should be seen as an “attack to the monopoly of the reference groups in the use of economic, educational, political, and religious goods and services.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Ezhava movement challenged social practices regarding caste pollution. These practices were one of the legitimizing mainstays of the social order. Pollution practices included limitations on the use of main roads, the non-fulfillment of proximity rules, and the practice of sharing food with lower castes. By challenging such pollution practices, the Ezhava movement started weakening the established social order.

In contrast, the position that Nair people held in the caste system did not require an attack on the religious system. However, the Nair movement's attempt to break their historical dependence on the Namboodiris—Brahmin caste—united them to the liberal mainstream. The movement sought to promote greater equality among different communities. It also attempted to change the rules that governed its internal organization—the matrilineal sys-

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10. R. Ramakrishnan Nair, *Social Structure and Political Development in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Academy of Political Science, 1976), p. 16.

11. I have adopted the categories developed by G. Lemercurier in *Religion and Ideology in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Center Tricontinental Louvain-la-Neuve and Insitute for the Study of Developing Areas, 1994), p. 127.

12. M. S. A. Rao, *Social Movements and Social Transformation* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1979), p. 249.

tem—that prevented it from taking advantage of new economic opportunities.

Overall, the dual aim of caste movements is remarkable. It amounted to the emancipation of people from religious and social constraints to give them access to new economic and political opportunities. In actual fact, it was necessary to launch a challenge against the socioreligious aspects of the social system in order to obtain these opportunities. Thus, one cannot deny that there was a sociopolitical dimension to caste movements—though it emerged later—given their primary objectives and main actions.

The original political strategy of the Ezhava and Nair movements to make a collective submission of the so-called Malayali Memorial to Travancore state authorities in 1891 called for equal access for all communities to public jobs, positions dominated by Tamil Brahmins. However, the Nair and Ezhava movements differed in their ultimate goals. While the aim of Nairs was the maintenance and recovery of the political and economic power enjoyed in traditional society, for the Ezhavas it was an attempt to obtain greater mobility on the ladders of social status and political power. The fight continued until the mid-1930s when the Abstention Movement—formed by Ezhavas, Muslims, and Christians—mobilized their communities to request not only fair quotas of public jobs but also political representation in the Assembly. Most of these requests were accepted in the 1930s.

The third feature of Kerala's caste movements is their caste rather than class nature. These movements mobilized popular support through caste loyalties and solidarity. In the case of lower castes, mobilization was related to pollution and proximity rules; in the case of higher castes, it was related to the internal organization of each community. Although some sociopolitical alliances were reached among different caste movements at that time, they did not lead to the breaking of caste movements on class lines. It has been suggested that the Malayali Memorial was submitted with such economic interests in mind, but this assertion does not seem too plausible because the alliance broke apart on the basis of different caste and community interests after its submission. The Ezhavas, Christians, and Muslims believed that Nairs were the main beneficiaries of the changes introduced. In fact, during the legislative reform of 1932, the two main caste communities that had developed active movements, the Ezhavas and the Nairs, submitted their petitions separately. Similarly, during the transfer of political power from colonial rule to the nationalist leaders of the Travancore State Congress, it was necessary to create a parallel committee in which the different communities had their own representation: the NSS, the SNDP Yogam, the Muslim League (ML), and a federation of lower castes among other associations. The development of caste movements thus led to the emergence of the “polit-

ically articulated ethnic blocs," so different communities organized to ask for their own political representation.<sup>13</sup>

However, it should be stated that insofar as some leaders of caste movements were advancing in terms of their social status, some cleavages based on class alignments eventually—not until the 1950s—did appear inside the caste movements. This factor is closely related to the fourth feature of caste movements: their leaders came from the middle classes that emerged in their respective communities as a result of the colonial impact on the economic and educational spheres. These classes in turn would largely become the main beneficiaries of the achievements of caste mobilization. This led to a greater differentiation among people in the Ezhava movement, which provoked important splits in the SNDP Yogam in the late 1930s.

Although the main benefits of caste mobilization were restricted to a minority, these improvements nonetheless "became bearers of a symbolic value for the whole community."<sup>14</sup> In fact, even the non-elite members of caste movements benefited in the sense that they became increasingly aware of the inequality and domination to which they were subjected. According to Lemercinier, the growing force of the Ezhava movement and its increasing mobilization were crucial in that they "presented the existing problems on the macro-dimension of society" and broke the isolation of traditional endogamic communities, which turned out to be undoubtedly a critical step toward the awakening of a new social consciousness.<sup>15</sup> This development is fundamental to understanding the genesis of the Kerala model. Therefore, in reviewing the main features of some caste movements and the actions they undertook, one can see the impact they have had and the legacy they have left behind.

One of the most important of these legacies was the erosion of the caste structure and the traditional social order, accompanied by the emergence of a social and political consciousness among the poorer sections of the population. This led these population groups to articulate their claims through collective mobilization. As noted earlier, the caste movements were the first step in the process of the change to the social consciousness; as such, they offered a strong foundation and model upon which later social groups could organize themselves. This development in turn is the basis for the highly organized Kerala society of the present moment. One example of these linkages can be found in the workers' organizations, which were helped by the improvements in literacy and the activities of the CPI (M). However, it is interesting to note that in spite of the change to the social order, caste identity in Kerala has not disappeared. In fact, caste movements and associations

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13. Rao, *Social Movements*, p. 255.

14. Lemercinier, *Religion and Ideology*, p. 189.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

have come into political life, resulting in the increasing politicization of the castes. Each community has adopted positions in relation to different political parties or even created their own parties. Inevitably, the development of new sources of power and new political processes after independence has produced a change in the patterns of political mobilization. In addition, there has been an alteration in traditional power relations.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Kerala's religious configuration—40% of the population is non-Hindu, mainly Christians and Muslims—has also shaped the political organization on communal lines.

In these ways, the caste movements have had an impact on the process of social change in Kerala. As Gusfield noted while challenging the linear theory of social change, “[T]raditional structures can supply skills, and traditional values can supply sources of *legitimation* which are capable of being utilized in pursuit of new goals and with new processes”<sup>17</sup> (emphasis added). In the case of Kerala, it means that the internal features of caste structure—typical of the traditional society—have supplied some of the elements needed to transform the social consciousness of Kerala's people, giving them the impetus to organize themselves and demand recognition of their social and political rights.

### The Historical Origin of Worker and Farmers' Organizations

Kerala has experienced a visible emergence of class consciousness and mobilization of its working people. This development, too, has played an important role in prompting the social changes occurring in the state's society. Multiple factors operating in concert with another served to mobilize the state's working class. The origins of Kerala's working class organizations can be traced to the state's colonial period experience and the subsequent proletarianization of one part of the population. Capitalist penetration into the state focused on the expansion of rural economic activities—which were centered on a minimum processing of raw materials—and featured the development of lower forms of capitalist relationships.

Undoubtedly, the rapid expansion of rural activities under the command of colonial capital led to an increase in the number of people working in plantations and factories. This trend established the precondition for the appearance of a rural proletariat that could be organized. A second factor that

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16. My understanding of power relations in traditional societies is derived from Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

17. J. R. Gusfield, “Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change,” *American Journal of Sociology* 72 (1966), p. 355.

favored their organization was the nationalist movement headed by political leaders engaged in not only an anti-colonial struggle but also an anti-feudal one. These political leaders were grouped in the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) under the Congress Party; some of them would later found the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1939. The struggle for political independence coincided with the earlier rural workers' mobilizations under the leadership of CSP and later of undivided CPI.

In fact, the development of the trade union movement cannot be explained without taking into consideration the influence of left-wing parties, particularly the CPI (M). This party followed a successful strategy aimed at the majority rural population and knew how to translate the demands of poorer people, mainly rural workers and agricultural laborers, into mobilization and action. As has been pointed out elsewhere, "the existence and the availability of a party with the appropriate ideology and strategy to organize the discontent of the laborers" is a condition for the mobilization of weaker sections of the population.<sup>18</sup>

There were objective conditions in place as well that favored support being earned for the socialist ideology that the state's political leaders were proclaiming at the time. These conditions included an increase in the burdens of tenants, a proliferation of different indirect taxes, unemployment and declining wages for workers, and food scarcity. The Great Depression of the 1930s aggravated these problems and placed economic hardships on the population that persisted.

One should also note the roles played by the rise in the population's literacy rate, the development of a people's culture promoted by secular organizations, and an expansion in the number of periodicals that helped facilitate the transmission of ideas. All of these elements helped raise social consciousness among the population, leading to a better knowledge of the potential for social mobilization and the articulation of interests toward the state.

Workers' associations appeared at the end of the 1920s and experienced expansion and growth in the 1930s. The concentration of main economic activities in certain regions, a fundamental element that explains the actions these organizations undertook in their formative stages, favored their emergence. Some of these areas where workers began to organize themselves included the coir industry in Allepey; plantations in highlands; tile industry in Calicut, Quilon, and Trichur; the cashew processing industry in Quilon; toddy taping in Trichur and Allepey; beedi workers in Cannanore; and agricultural laborers in Kuttanad and Palghat.<sup>19</sup>

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18. J. Tharamangalam, *Agrarian Class Conflict* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1981), p. 92.

19. K. P. Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilization and Organization of Rural Workers in South-West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 68.

The CSP played a fundamental role in stimulating the creation of the earlier organizations and the holding of strikes in the 1930s. They were involved in the promotion of the All Kerala Workers Conference in 1935, for example. Other early moves to organize included the decision to create trade union committees in each industry, the organization of workers in Kuttanad, and the foundation of the Quilon Factory Workers' Associations (largely cashew industry workers). The task that the political parties had created for themselves was soon led by the CPI, although both the CSP and the CPI played critical roles in channeling the workers' grievances over working conditions and political demands for a responsible government in 1946.

The emergence of agrarian associations was heavily influenced by the changes promoted in land ownership after the arrival of the British. In Travancore, the land reforms that went into effect in 1865 reduced the power of *jenmies* (landlords). Malabar, on the other hand, experienced no change in land relations. Tenant farmers there were subjected to tough exploitation practices by *jenmies*; these practices affected both the tenant farmers under the zamindari system and agricultural laborers. The Malabar Tillers Association (MTA) was created in this economic and social context with the main aim of denouncing the conditions that the tenants were suffering. The Kerala Tillers Association (KTA) was created in 1956 and, under the influence of the CPI, took up the same objectives as had the MTA. The improvement of tenant's conditions brought about by the land reform measures had created a new set of problems, for agricultural laborers now felt that the MTA was discriminating against them in turn. Tenant farmers refused to improve the laborers' working conditions; the laborers responded by leaving the MTA and creating the Kerala State Agricultural Labor Union. This in turn prompted a reaction from MTA farmers who left that group and joined the Kerala Farmers Association (KFA)—affiliated to Kerala Congress.

Another change in farmers' associations occurred at the end of the 1960s when a split arose between small farmers and agricultural laborers. In part, their division over land reform did more to improve the economic situation of tenants rather than of agricultural laborers. This situation was linked to caste sentiments. Although the material and living conditions of the mainly Ezhava small proprietors and untouchable-caste agrarian laborers were not so different, pressures brought on by the high-caste, big-proprietor members of the KFA helped to push them apart. This case shows how caste identity persisted in spite of an increasing class consciousness. The development also illustrates how Kerala's society remains highly divided and organized owing to each group's desire to guarantee and safeguard its own interests. Be that as it may, it can be said that the expansion of workers' associations in Kerala in response to demands for labor rights and the linkages these associations have formed with various political parties has been noticeable.



The impact of trade unionism in Kerala is critical to understanding the increased social consciousness of the poorer sections of the society. Unionization can be analyzed from different perspectives. The rapid expansion of workers' organizations took place primarily among those participating in organized economic activities, but expansion also could be seen in the unorganized sector. The high degree of unionization has also breached the rural-urban frontiers, extending to the small-scale sector and handicraft industries. The development of labor institutions has not been limited to trade unions; it has included the creation of Industrial Relations Committees in different sectors. Finally, the organization of workers has resulted in important progress in wage and time regulations, welfare measures, and institutional reforms, especially in those sectors where unionism is heavily developed.

However, it cannot be asserted that there has been a complete transformation of traditional labor markets. Most domestic activities, and especially in which women are engaged, remain outside public control and regulations. There clearly is a direct correlation between the degree of unionism and the improvement of labor conditions and wages. One of the best examples of this is the case of agricultural laborers. Despite the effect that workers' associations and trade unions have had in transforming labor markets and how they function, one can see increasing segmentation of the labor market by trade unions, dependent on caste and gender issues. Another feature of unionism has been their politicization, an outcome of both the role played by communist parties in the organization of workers and the integration of the leaderships of political parties and trade unions, which has led some to speak of "political unionism."<sup>20</sup>

The impact of the rise of workers' associations remains visible today. One continues to see a proliferation of trade unions, each affiliated to a political party. Although the CPI (M) has dominated workers' organizations since the mid-1960s, there has been increasing fragmentation of the union movement with rivalries arising between each faction. The organization and mobilization of workers have also transformed contractual relationships, a critical development in a society where caste loyalties have historically defined the social and labor relationships between people. Although it cannot be asserted that the development of labor institutions has dramatically changed the traditional caste-class correlation by promoting a radical occupational mobility, one does note that there has been a shift in traditional labor relationships based on caste loyalties. The rapid expansion of unionization and the change

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20. P. Heller, "From Class Struggle to Class Compromise: Redistribution and Growth in a South Indian State." *Journal of Development Studies* 31, no. 5 (1995), p. 654.

in social consciousness have led to labor relations to become more “formal, impersonal, and contractual.”<sup>21</sup>

A 1973 study comparing Kerala and other Indian states showed how Kerala's population stands out in how it perceives social reality: the people's refusal of patron-client relationships, the weakening of the notion of fate in their lives, and their ideological orientation toward equality and distributive issues. This study's findings offer strong evidence of the change in social consciousness. Such a change is especially important in a society where the subjection of most of the population was a factor of not only the mode of production but also the mode of domination. This being the case, at this point it is important to assess how the impact of the organization of rural workers and agricultural laborers has transformed the consciousness of and subsequent articulation of economic and social demands by different social groups in Kerala.

Lastly, one notes that there has been remarkable change in the dynamics and strategies of trade unions vis-à-vis the state and the corporate sector since the 1980s. After two decades of workers' unrest characterized by mobilizations, strikes, and labor conflicts, trade unions and the CPI (M) have seen the need to advance toward a negotiated conflict. The presumed effects of labor unrest on economic growth, along with the CPI (M)'s political and electoral calculations, have led different parties in conflict to reach a kind of a collective labor agreement focused on wages and productivity increases. It is expected that this tendency to tripartite agreements—representing as they do a different way to organize along one of the most important dimensions of state-society relationships—will open better perspectives to accelerate economic growth.

In Kerala, the segmentation and stratification of labor markets along caste considerations; the political divisions between CPI (M), CPI, and the Congress Party; and economic backwardness have all constrained in some way the potential of class movements to effect a radical transformation of the social order that would embrace the whole population. The mobilization and organization of the workers undeniably has played a role in promoting a greater class-consciousness among the population. This has translated into the erosion of the traditional social structure, collective action leading to social change, and the improvement of living conditions of the poorer people through distributive measures. An examination of the role of workers' associations in this process of change should also take into account the development of people's movements that raised awareness of different social

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21. K. P. Kannan, “Labor Institutions and Development Process in Kerala” in T. S. Papola and G. Rodgers, ed., *Labor Institutions and Economic Development in India* (Geneva: International Labor Organization-International Institute of Labor Studies, 1992), p. 54.

issues among the population in order to promote social development and greater mass participation.

### Contemporary Political Configurations and the Role of the CPI (M): A Contrast with West Bengal

The dynamics of Kerala's political process are rooted in the state's social character. Such factors as its religious configuration, increasing class consciousness, and the persistence of caste identity have all been reflected in the process of political change and configuration of political alliances. They have produced the political fragmentation that can be considered one of the state's most prominent features. It has produced a game of battling coalitions, headed by two political fronts: the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the leadership of the Congress Party and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) dominated by the CPI (M). They regularly have alternated in power and the differences in votes have often been minimal. Compelled by the need to form a government, each has shared the state government with numerous small parties. As a consequence, each has also been faced with the need to make important political concessions to different members of the coalition. Although this strategy has often affected the state's ability to design and apply a coherent economic strategy under either front, the CPI (M) has become a nodal point in the political evolution and social development of the Kerala state.

It is interesting to note the expansion of and mass support for communist parties in Kerala in contrast with the features of the other Indian communist state, West Bengal. In Kerala, the CPI (M) obtained its support through a strategy mainly focused on the rural population and based on the integration of lower caste activists in its leadership. The CPI (M)'s political success in Kerala has also been related to the politics of non-cooperation with the Congress Party. Furthermore, the CPI (M) was a leader among the forces pushing for the application of land reform. Approved by the Communist Party in 1957, land reform led to a process of cooptation of communist cadres and leaders among the rural population.

The study undertaken by Zagoria on the electoral basis of the CPI (M) illustrates the differences in the political strategies this party pursued in Kerala and West Bengal. His main finding from interviews of CPI (M) voters in Kerala was that they are mainly rural (90%), belong to lower socioeconomic classes (45%), and have a high literacy rate (81%). The strategy the CPI (M)

adopted in Kerala has thus allowed the party to develop a broad social and electoral basis.<sup>22</sup>

Studying the evolution and characteristics of Kerala's state governments helps one to understand the political dynamics in the state and especially the process by which these have affected the state's role in the process of social change. Important in this regard is the bipolarization that characterizes Kerala's political system. Differing from a two-party system, this bipolarization is closely related to the social fragmentation that has produced political atomization and generates the picture of coalition politics that has typified Kerala's experience. This can be clearly seen in the internal configuration of the LDF and the UDF. Both fronts have found it necessary to reach political alliances with different political parties organized on communal and religious lines.

In the late 1960s, the main caste interests started organizing on political lines through the creation of the Nair National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Ezhava Socialist Republican Party (SRP). Muslims likewise mobilized their interests through the ML and Christians mainly through the Kerala Congress. All have formed different fronts, although the Congress Party has mostly accommodated communal interests. This was observed in the UDF governments of 1971 in which all of these parties were members of the ruling coalition, and of 1982, which by having 19 ministries showed an even higher degree of political fragmentation. This period has been one of the most shameful in the political history of Kerala, with corruption, nepotism, and communalism rife throughout. As for the CPI (M), its collaboration with Muslims is noticeable. After the ML split apart in 1975, Muslims have been represented in both LDF and UDF governments. However, the CPI (M) has committed itself since 1987 to refusing any alliance with communal parties.

A second feature of Kerala politics is the constraints coalition governments have imposed on the administration and management of state machinery. Undoubtedly, that all of the governing coalitions were highly unstable placed especially heavy requirements on the majority party to make concessions to coalition members that affected the efficiency of public administration. A good example can be seen in the conditions imposed by ML when it entered the coalition government headed by CPI (M) in 1965. The CPI (M) was forced to grant two ministerial posts to the ML and impose a higher quota on the number of Muslims to be hired for public service.

Probably, the most pernicious effect of having to form a series of coalition governments is the absence of continuity in governance. Once each coalition achieves power, it is worried mainly about satisfying its respective interests.

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22. Donald Zagoria, "Kerala and West Bengal." *Problems of Communism*, 22 (1973), pp. 16–27.

As a result, attention to state government duties and responsibilities takes a secondary role. This development works against democratic transparency. While numerous political parties have represented different social interests to varying degrees in state governments, the political dynamic that has resulted is characterized by the state government feeling it must give positive answers to disparate organized interests. Such dynamics tend to be mutual self-reinforcing and help to explain the peculiar state-society relationship that shapes the Kerala model.

It is also interesting to observe the nature of coalition governments in Kerala in terms of its communist element, that is, to see what factors have defined the political strategies adopted by the CPI and the CPI (M) after their split in 1964. Both parties have gone beyond the language of class compromise and secular commitment when deciding to form political coalitions, often justifying their decisions out of pragmatic considerations. The CPI strategy has focused on its approach to Congress Party and several communal parties; the CPI (M)'s choices of political alliances have been affected by non-secular issues, as seen in its coalitions with the ML or the Kerala Congress. The pragmatism has been explained by the need to reach a broader democratic alliance in the case of the former, while the latter party has justified its actions by the need to form an anti-Congress Party front as a precondition for attaining certain long-term objectives. The policy measures the CPI (M) pursued when in power demonstrate its commitment to its class constituency. This could be seen in the case of the agrarian and educational reforms pursued by the non-split CPI in the first state government in 1957. The CPI (M) for its part has shown its ability to achieve political compromises on several occasions. Some examples include the development of social assistance schemes, new programs for better resource management, the Total Literacy Program of 1987–91, and its efforts aimed at political decentralization under the People's Campaign for the 9th Plan (1997–98).

Whatever the approach to political alliance formation followed by the communist parties, it must be recognized that the outcomes they could expect were limited by not only the political animosities between them but also the social and political features of Kerala. The CPI (M) made a remarkable shift in its electoral strategy, generating a new political agenda that changed the party's focus from its traditional "struggle and administration" approach to a new peaceful-neutral image in order to reach new potential voters, particularly among the middle class.<sup>23</sup> This change from class-struggle to development politics has been qualified by some scholars as representing a choice

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23. The expression "struggle and administration" was first used by Robert Hardgrave in his analysis of the ULF government in 1967–69. Hardgrave, "The Marxist Dilemma in Kerala: Administration and/or Struggle," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 11 (1970), pp. 993–1003.

that goes beyond class issues and conforms to a new strategy. Indeed, the shifts by both parties were influenced by the stagnation in the share of the votes the CPI (M) party (like the Congress Party) could expect—around one-third of the electorate—as well as the narrow differences between the fronts these parties led.

The continuing interaction between caste and class in Kerala politics also needs to be analyzed. Communal pressures on the state coming from both political parties and caste associations aimed at obtaining economic and social benefits had the potential to make Kerala's political process one dominated by caste rather than class politics. However, such factors as the state's involvement in the provision of social welfare facilities to the majority population and the 1987–91 LDF government's adoption of the Mandal Commission's recommendations show how class issues in fact have been one of the defining factors of politics in the state. In fact, the relationship between class and caste has tended to be an overlapping rather than oppositional one in its effect on political change. Class-caste interests have coincided at some time and diverged at others but have always been expressed within a context of mutual coexistence.

Thus, the political dynamics of Kerala are such that such factors as political atomization, coalition politics, the politicization of castes, the social basis of the CPI (M), and the party's ability to effect compromises all have the potential to affect how the state interacts with society. This has led to a transformation in how the state responds to different social interests. The particular constellation of political forces in Kerala has also influenced the development strategy pursued by the state. The state has been compelled to respond favorably to the varying demands of groups in local society. The state thus has been responsive not only to the interests of the dominant classes but also those of the non-dominant ones, a pattern that is crucial to explaining the so-called Kerala model. Furthermore, this process of social change has been developed internally from society.

### State-Society Relationships and the “Kerala Model”

Kerala's unique societal features have marked the process of social change experienced in the state. These factors have encouraged different social groups to mobilize in order to organize their claims in defense of their own interests. Kerala's society has evolved from a rigid traditional order toward a more democratic and participatory model where social forces have been able to articulate their demands toward political institutions. This outcome has been the product of a transformation of social consciousness. This change in turn has been supported by such factors as the efforts of caste movements to defy traditional order, the forging of a class consciousness, the welcome ex-

tended to radical ideologies, expansion of popular culture, and the communist leadership's efforts to organize a variety of social movements. The process of social change thus has produced a highly organized and mobilized society.

At the same time, the state has accommodated the demands of different politically organized social groups. Although some political forces represented in Kerala, such as the CPI (M), have shown the will to develop economic strategies that reach the whole population, the state has been compelled to satisfy diverse demands from organized social groups. Consequently, the dynamics of the interaction between state and society in Kerala must be considered from two perspectives: (a) the capacity and disposition of political forces in the state to isolate the interests of dominant classes, and (b) the state's need and ability to offer a solution to the distributive conflict that exists in the local society. Therefore, given the organization and mobilization of different social groups, one can conclude that Kerala is characterized by an expansion and dispersal of power to a degree that has permitted a wide range of economic and social interests to effectively articulate their demands.

This pattern of broadly dispersed and distributed political and social power in turn has produced a model in which economic and social benefits also have been highly distributed. The state's people thus have become empowered. Kerala's achievements rest on the collective struggles fought by its subjected castes, rural workers, and religious communities. Their efforts to improve social conditions have been reinforced by political dynamics characterized by both the political will and the need for legitimacy on the part of those in power. Hence, the state responds to the demands of different social groups.

Kerala's state-society relationships have produced a model of governance that is relatively autonomous of dominant class interests. The state has developed distributive policies that have benefited the majority of the population and has improved the living conditions of its less well-off citizens. The government's development strategy demonstrates the potential that the organization and mobilization of social forces can have on the articulation of their demands. Indeed, in the case of Kerala the state's relative autonomy is not expressed in terms of the state being free from the pressures of economic and social interests, but rather by the fact that dominant class interests do not have the final say over the state's economic policy making.

The role of the state in developing this distributive model has been focused on distribution issues; the sphere of production has been left untouched. The state thus is trapped by different economic and social interests that in turn have prevented the state from executing capital accumulation functions. Such an outcome suggests that this strategy will be unsustainable in the long term. However, the need to accelerate economic growth leads to what may be called the paradox of the Kerala model. To the extent that the model of social development is rooted in the political and social organization of differ-

ent groups in society, it will be difficult to eliminate the distributive benefits that they enjoy. Policy measures that may threaten the distributive model are thus susceptible to sabotage and so the trade-off between redistribution and growth is thereby served.

In any case, it is quite obvious that the ability to maintain the Kerala model is dependent on such factors other than the state as Kerala's non-articulated economic structure, which constrains the process of economic growth even as it shows the limitations of underdeveloped capitalism; the state government's financial dependence on the central government; and the current globalization process that undermines the state's ability to autonomously pursue its own policies.

The process of social change experienced by Kerala has featured not only a distributive state applying an equity-based strategy but also efforts to prevent the political and economic hegemony of the dominant classes. The mobilization and organization of subjected groups have decisively influenced the pattern of state-society relationships and the resulting process of social development. As has been pointed out in this article, the organization of subjected groups can become an important bulwark against the perversion of narrow state-society relations into an elite clientelism, which in fact can more easily threaten the process of development.

The logic behind the Kerala model must therefore be understood within the framework of social transformation experienced by Kerala society. The transformation started with the erosion of a traditional order characterized by authority and domination and was followed by the organization and mobilization of economic and social interests that encompassed a large part of the population. Insofar as these factors have influenced the state in the distributive principles it adopted, it can be asserted that the type of state-society relationships seen in Kerala has promoted the development of a relatively autonomous state. The Kerala model shows the specificity of the interaction between the economic structure and the non-economic elements in its society, and teaches that the sustainability of human development in developing countries requires a state that is capable of articulating redistribution with growth.

## Conclusion

The Indian state of Kerala uniquely demonstrates achievement in high levels of human development corresponding to the interaction of social, cultural, and political factors that have operated in Kerala society since the 19th century. In this article, I have shown that the role of caste movements in the erosion of traditional order, the organization of workers under communist leaders and mobilization of other social groups defending their respective interests, and the role of the CPI (M) have worked together in transforming the social consciousness of the state's citizens.



While the benefits produced by the Kerala model are important, it must also be noted that problems are emerging as well. The paradox of the Kerala model is expressed by the social and political constraints posed by the rising need to accelerate the rate of economic growth.

I have argued that the collaborative efforts of different social forces have led to a particular pattern of state-society relationships. The demands of these social forces have been accommodated by a state operating in relative autonomy from the interests of dominant classes. Moreover, the increasing mobilization and articulation of economic and social interests within this politically organized and highly fragmented society have resulted in a dispersal pattern of power that has encouraged the development of a model in which economic benefits have also been greatly distributed.