

*In case of interest/use, very rough translation from an op-ed piece which published in the Swedish 'Daily ETC' 23/6/2021 and in the Norwegian 'Klasskampen' 19/6/2021 – widely read and respected green-left dailies.*

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### **India is not just misery, there is an alternative**

*In the public discourse, India is lost. Democracy is waning and the religious right wing populism takes over. The Congress party is powerless and the Muslims are exempted from equal citizenship. Market-driven growth increases inequality and the health care system does not cope with Covid-19. Many ordinary people lose their livelihood and migrant workers are driven out on the roads. Numerous people die helpless in their homes and the sites for cremation remain overloaded. This is the mainstream picture of the situation, and much of it is true. However, the second question in each critical analysis is missing: are there any counter movements, any alternatives?*

The answer is yes. In the recent state elections, Prime Minister Modi's BJP party lost in West Bengal. Actually, the resistance is strongest in the south, where socio-religious reform movements have reduced caste oppression. In Tamil Nadu, the BJP received only 4 of 234 seats and in Kerala not a single one. Kerala's 35 million inhabitants even have an alternative. Its left-wing alliance with liberals was entrusted to fight the pandemic by way of democracy and welfare, with a view to sustainable development. This has not only been recognised in India but also praised in international media like the Guardian and the New York Times, and among scientists as Nobel Laureates Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz. But in Scandinavia there is silence. Even though most of us would probably dream of such alternatives. How can Kerala go against the flow? What's the secret?

Kerala's historical lessons are reminiscent of how liberals and social democrats built Scandinavia. As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, socio-religious popular movements fought colonialism and caste oppression. From the 1930s, several of them joined hands with socialist led radical peasants and workers in the struggle for equal civil, political and social rights. The socialists collaborated first with the liberals and others in the Congress Party, but then most of them joined the Communists. This was mainly to fulfil the essentially social democratic agenda that Congress had abandoned, including land reform and welfare programs -- which the left could then implement in the 50's and 60's.

Still, this was not enough. In spite of India's best education, health care, labour organising and land reform, production did not increase as expected and industrialisation did not take off. Many people acquired benefits through political connections and speculation, or used good education to get well-paid jobs outside Kerala, especially in the Gulf countries. Such setbacks were common in the "third world", but Kerala found new solutions. From the 1980s, a broad educational movement in civil society managed to break the stagnation. The activists made Kerala the first state in India where even the poorest could read and write and engage together with other citizens. In addition, local resources were mapped to facilitate sustainable development and cooperation among the small farmers. The initiatives contributed to the success of the left front in the 1996 elections and made its leaders agree on radical decentralization to democratically elected municipalities. These received significant resources for their own development projects, provided that the advices of the State Planning Board were followed and that the citizens were allowed to participate in decisions and implementation. Everything was not successful, but thanks to the equal civil rights, the land reform

and the democratic participation, the elite has not been able to entirely dominate the local institutions and projects as in so many other cases.

Twenty years later, it was therefore the democratic decentralisation with popular participation that made it possible for the Left to not only overcome Nipah, the worst virus of all, and then deal with a range of natural disasters with floods and landslides, but also to combat Corona in an efficient and socially fair and responsible manner. Even when the first Corona case was discovered in January 2020, the local health services was mobilised to educate residents how to defend themselves, test and track the infection and to organise local quarantines - combined with economic and social support for the victims, including food baskets and soup kitchens in collaboration with civil society. The local health care providers also ensure that the seriously ill receive hospital care, the best in the country. Until April 2020, Kerala thus managed to slow down the spread of the virus to a minimum and the then minister of health, schoolteacher KK Shailaja, gained international rock-star status. While Sweden's privatisation and new public management led to appalling deaths in local care for the elderly, Kerala's democratic decentralization and popular participation made wonders.

Thanks to the welfare projects, Kerala could also withstand the Hindu fundamentalist provocations and restrictions of equal civil rights. Similarly, voluntary local work and resource mobilisation offset the central government's attempt to starve Kerala with a smaller proportion of the centrally controlled tax revenue. Self-help was obviously not enough, but to New Delhi's annoyance, Kerala undogmatic then Finance Minister Thomas Isaac (who previously led the work on decentralisation and popular planning), had also initiated a complementary international fund for investments in infrastructure, education and healthcare.

However: Kerala is no independent island nation like Taiwan or New Zealand that can close the borders. The situation worsened when 1.4 million migrant workers returned. (Which may be compared with the number of migrants that Scandinavia considers itself capable of helping out.) In addition, there were family meetings during holidays. So the community transmission increased and many more people were in need of jobs and support. This could not only be handled locally.

In the mid-2020 Kerala was therefore facing similar problems as Sweden with poor coordination of state, regions, municipalities, civic and trade union organisations as well as private actors. Institutions for broader cooperation had not complemented Kerala's successful decentralisation sufficiently. The villages and municipalities cannot take responsibility for welfare themselves when more and more people work outside the local economy. The local economy needs to be connected to the external, and public planning must be carried out in cooperation with private actors. In addition, citizens' local organizations must work together at the central Kerala level. Otherwise, the outcome will be as in Brazil where the participatory budgeting Puerto Alegre and elsewhere could not stop the corruption in Brasilia, the capital. And an authoritarian system is not a solution. Not even the Chinese Communist Party could coordinate production in the people's communes, but adopted Deng Xiaoping's market solutions, in corrupt cooperation between party leaders and businessmen.

Kerala is now trying various ways ahead. The Corona situation is severe but under control. Health care is coordinated in command rooms at the district level and include private providers. In contrast to Modi's India, due responsibility is taken for people's rights and wellbeing. In the run-up to the local elections in December, the left-led

front promised support and jobs - and the approval was overwhelming. Prior to the state elections in April, it also launched a plan to further improve the good health, education and training so that it would facilitate knowledge-based development, together with domestic and foreign businesses. The result was that an incumbent government, for the first time in forty years in Kerala, was re-elected. And the survey results are unambiguous: voters did not vote for person but for party and politics; they appreciated the effective and socially just management of the natural disasters and the pandemic, and they were positive to the development plans.

It's hard to imagine anything more hopeful in today's Global South. Kerala broad alliance for health and welfare programmes that also unify the different crucial actors in favour of democratic and sustainable development do not only remind of the social- and green "deals" in Scandinavia and the United States.

It is also consistent with other positive experiences in the South. According to my comparative research, the stumbling block is democratic participation of strong idea and interest organisations. If that fails, there is a risk that a populist president or a chief minister will dominate. Kerala benefits from its local democratic participation, but there are few counterparts at the general level. Ideally, such democratic institutions can now be built in the process of designing and implementing the new welfare programs and the investments in knowledge-based development. It will not be easy. But if one does not just want to be horrified by the political and human disasters in Modi's India but also contain them, there is thus an option in Kerala to learn from, collaborate with, and invest in.

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