

Kerala's Education System: Is More Government the Solution?

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This note on Kerala's education system counters some of the observations made by N Ajith Kumar and K K George ("Kerala's Education System: From Inclusion to Exclusion?", EPW, 10 October 2009).

The present state of Kerala's education system is a cause of concern for every right-thinking Keralite. Some of the recent developments like student-financed institutions have created a lot of apprehensions in Kerala society. Therefore, the article by N Ajith Kumar and K K George (hereafter referred to as AG) on Kerala's education system ("Kerala's Education System: From Inclusion to Exclusion?", EPW, 10 October 2009) is quite timely and pertinent. However, the prescriptions they implicitly put forward merit larger debate and discussion. This note is directed to some of their findings and observations.

Deterioration in Quality

AG find fault with the state for "the failure to improve the quality of schooling and increase the intake capacity of professional education institutions". The quality of schooling began to deteriorate since the late 1970s when the government introduced the practice of giving liberal promotions throughout till a student reaches the school final. Since then, the valuation of school final examination papers has been liberalised with the pass percentage consistently going up year after year. Significantly, this period also coincided with the "Gulf boom" and faster pace of industrial development in some of the states. Both offered job opportunities to blue-collar workers and clerical staff. It is not known whether it was a well-conceived strategy on the part of the government to facilitate migration of as many people as possible. Why to cause frustration in young people, when the state does not have much to offer? The students who entered the university system in the subsequent years also contributed to the decline in the quality of higher education in no small measure.

The deterioration that had set in thus was reinforced by the system of aided schools and colleges wherein government meets the salary expenditure of teachers and non-teaching staff appointed by managements. Of the total government-run and aided schools, 59% are aided schools. The same for arts and science colleges is as high as 79%. AG mention only the "widespread corruption, nepotism and communalisation in appointment of teachers". The bigger damage was that a significant proportion of teachers thus appointed were "qualified" in the technical sense only. The unions of teachers affiliated to various political parties operated as pressure groups to protect the salary and service conditions and rarely initiated or supported genuine qualitative changes. The unions have their representatives in various academic bodies and even got their representatives installed as vice chancellors and pro-vice chancellors (one vice chancellor and one pro-vice chancellor of two different universities in Kerala were once top functionaries of teachers' unions). An academically less inclined student community and their not-so-confident teachers perfectly complimented each other.

It is the declining quality of education that paved the way for student-financed educational institutions. The parents in Kerala, irrespective of caste and class are almost paranoid about the education of their children. They know better than anybody the importance of education and getting out of the state. Proficiency in English is widely perceived as a sure bet for upward social mobility. This made the self-financing English medium schools popular even among the lower income sections. It may be noted that in terms of educational qualifications, the teachers in many of these schools are far below those of government-run or aided institutions. Whether right or wrong, people have a different perception of quality of schooling and the competence of teachers is only one part of it. The commitment of teachers, discipline and character formation, infrastructure, orderly manner in which the school is being run are some of the other factors shaping this perception. People could observe a kind of "law and order" in English medium schools

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which are totally free from strikes by students and teachers. In the beginning, only the upper middle class used to send their children to such schools. The demonstration effect of unaided schools is so powerful that now even daily wage earners send their children to such schools often sacrificing other family needs. Wherever unaided schools exist, teachers in government-run or aided schools send their children there despite strictures from teachers' unions. Could this trend be reversed by government starting or funding more institutions as AG think?

Equity Considerations

As the authors have rightly pointed out, the emerging scenario raises serious questions of equity. But the contention that only government-owned or funded institutions can ensure inclusive features is far from convincing. The underlying assumption that the present system of reservation of seats in government-owned or funded institutions caters to equity considerations is also not entirely correct. The basis of existing reservation system is not economic status but community. The seats reserved for backward communities and disadvantaged groups are cornered by the "creamy layer" in these communities. The ruling of the apex court that the creamy layer should be excluded has been bypassed through legislation.

Is government starting or funding new institutions the solution as AG think? Given the fiscal situation, when will the government be able to do it? On the contrary, equity considerations will be better served, if government meets the expenditures of the eligible students joining self-financing institutions through liberal scholarships. This way the distortions in the existing system of reservation can also be corrected.

Fiscal Aspects

AG find fault with the government for not mobilising additional resources for financing new education institutions despite the increase in taxable capacity. It is true that the increase in disposable income of most households owes it to state funding of education which helped large-scale out-migration. But the state has only partially succeeded in siphoning off a portion of the increased income. Constitutional division of taxing powers between the centre and

states has not assigned the states tax handles which can effectively bring remittances under the tax net. States can levy only commodity taxes. Almost 70% of the own revenue of Kerala is accounted by this source. Theoretically, the potential for commodity taxation in Kerala remains largely untapped as several studies have shown (see for example, Sebastian 1992). But practically it is extremely difficult, if not impossible to push tax effort beyond a point. As a narrow strip of land, Kerala has to be careful to avoid diversion of trade to the neighbouring states.

The other option was levying appropriate user charges on health and educational services. Despite the recommendations of several expert commissions/committees, the fee structure in the higher education sector has not been periodically revised presumably due to political reasons. Had it been done, the fiscal crisis would not have worsened to this degree and government could have indeed set apart more resources for the education sector.

Kerala Model of Development

In the last part of the paper AG criticise the political parties for not having any clear strategy for protecting the gains of the Kerala model of development. If the Kerala model is the contribution of the state's public expenditure pattern, it is the same expenditure pattern that is undermining its gains. As the second author had rightly pointed out elsewhere, fiscal crisis of the state has grown into a development crisis (George 1999). The narrow resource base of the state owes a lot to the stagnation of the productive sectors. Is it not a weakness of the Kerala model of development? It has been rightly pointed out that it is unemployment that is acting as a stimulant for higher education in Kerala (Nair and Thomas 1984). As per the latest figures, there are 42 lakh people registered with the employment exchanges. If the Kerala model had succeeded at the economic front, perhaps the situation of higher education being forced on a sizeable section of youngsters would not have arisen. The productive years of a whole generation of youth are wasted in undergoing degree courses and waiting for government jobs.

The immediate priority of the state, therefore, should be to find a solution to this impasse. Since the early 1980s, the

share of capital expenditure in the total expenditure of the state has been consistently coming down. As on 2007-08, it is just 8.31%. Since 1983-84, the state has been using funds borrowed at high rates of interest to meet revenue expenditure. Unless the state invests substantially in infrastructure, it may not be possible to rejuvenate the productive sectors. Given the limited scope of additional resource mobilisation, the best option seems to be to exclude the section of the people who are capable of fending themselves, and thereby, free precious resources. Public expenditure on education and health may have to be targeted to the section of the people who really need public support. Is it not a more socially acceptable form of resource mobilisation than taxing and spending?

It is against this fiscal imperative that the self-financing institutions should be viewed. What the state now needs is not arts and science colleges but institutions offering courses in the cutting edge areas of science and technology.

Self-financing institutions may not be the best alternative. Kerala society cannot afford to have a negative attitude to them.

Lastly, the authors seem to have a static view of Kerala model of development. A development model should be a dynamic one which interacts with the changing world and experimenting with new ways of doing things and learning from it. Viewed from this angle, the present state of education offers considerable scope for a reappraisal of the Kerala model of development.

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