

Understanding Kerala's Response to the Covid 19 Pandemic; Exploring 'Kerala Social Model'

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Introduction

The outbreak of a global pandemic caused by Novel Coronavirus affected many lives in varied ways across the world. Many countries are striving to find and adopt new strategies to contain the virus. While some nations are relatively, if not completely, successful in their efforts to contain the virus within their own territorial limits, many other countries are still struggling with their failed policies and strategies. Due to lack of experience and expertise in dealing with a pandemic, many governments in various countries have resorted to different solutions based on trial and error methods including a complete lockdown, despite the possible dire consequences on national and global economy.

Even though there are success stories of some countries in containing the spread of virus, many challenges such as lack of capacity, resources, and resolve still remain unaddressed in most of the countries (WHO 2020). However, amidst the chaos, Kerala, the southernmost state in India, has drawn world-wide attention in its dealing with COVID-19. It has emerged as a successful model in containing the virus with its well laid out plans and strategies. The following sections deal with a detailed analysis of Kerala's response to the global pandemic and the factors that are responsible for its successful implementation.

Kerala's Response to Covid-19 and the Factors behind its Success

Kerala's approach to the pandemic has become a model to be emulated by other states and countries, majorly due to its high recovery rates and low mortality. There are many factors which contributed to the success of the Kerala model of containing the virus. The role of governmental machinery in dealing with the pandemic has drawn wider attention. The preparedness of the government and the health ministry was very apparent when the state received its first case of COVID positive in a student who returned from the Wuhan University in China. The government authorities were able to foresee the returning of their people who were working in different parts of the country and the world. This has helped the state to efficiently handle the issue and bring the situation under control at the outset itself. The government's experience in dealing with the outbreak of Nipah Virus and the natural calamity of flood in last two years has helped the authority to deal with another crisis in the state with more efficiency and great alertness. K Shailaja, the Minister of Health and Social Welfare in the government of Kerala was hugely applauded for her work in stopping the outbreak of Nipah Virus. Her leadership and supervision along with the advantage of having an early experience of dealing with unprecedented calamities in the state also decided the success of Kerala's response to Novel Coronavirus. Consequently, she has received a global recognition for her handling of Covid-19 (Mathew and Abantika 2020).

Another remarkable feature of the Kerala model of pandemic control is the complete compliance of the government with the guidelines given by World Health Organization (WHO) in dealing with the condition. WHO suggested all countries to adopt a "whole-of-government, whole-of-society" approach to contain the infectious virus and minimize the impact. WHO had mainly highlighted four key areas to be focused which are: a. Preparedness and readiness b. Detection, protection and treatment c. Reduction in transmissions d. Innovation and learning. The officials of WHO also proposed a comprehensive strategy of co-operation and co-ordination between all the stakeholders. They reiterated that the communication with people regarding the risks and the measures to protect themselves is highly important (WHO 2020).

WHO also highlighted the factors that are more actionable such as “prevention, preparedness, public health, political leadership and most of all, people” (WHO 2020). The process of isolation, testing and tracing with a proper hospital facility is an important measure to be followed. WHO stated that “if countries detect, test, treat, isolate, trace, and mobilize their people in the response, those with a handful of cases can prevent those cases becoming clusters, and those clusters becoming community transmission” (WHO 2020). Kerala government was successful in strictly following and implementing the WHO guidelines. Government played a pivotal role in successfully communicating the need of a collective responsibility to its people to contain the virus which is in consonance with the observation made by WHO, that defeating the global pandemic is everyone’s business and everybody has to take care of each other and need each other.

The governmental machineries were efficient in forging strategies based on a comprehensive and pragmatic understanding of the limitations and potentials of the health system. It was realized that since the number of people coming back to states from within and outside India would be large in number, the option of institutional quarantine found to be difficult. Hence, the state government decided that people with no symptoms can be put in home quarantine and symptomatic patients are taken to hospitals. In addition to that, the methods such as testing, contact tracing, quarantining, isolation, treatment, strong screening system at the airport were successfully administered under the supervision of state health departments. The state was at the forefront to run awareness campaigns among the public on physical distancing. The proper planning of the government was also a key to the success of Kerala model of pandemic response (Spinney 2020).

The efficient functioning of the local governance institutions in Kerala was also helpful in spearheading the mission of containing the Coronavirus in their localities. There was a strict panchayat level monitoring of the situation. Every panchayat was given the responsibility of launching a dedicated phone number and deliver cooked food at the doorstep to mitigate hunger of the poor during lockdown (Swamy 2020). The role of police in implementing the rules and regulations during lockdown was also instrumental in the success of the Kerala model of the police force in Kerala has been actively engaging in the awareness campaign against Novel Coronavirus (Anand & Praveen 2020). They released

many videos to increase awareness about the coronavirus among the public. The state's police force also used drones to enforce the lockdown and track those who flouted lockdown rules (Nandy 2020). Though the drone videos released by the police brought laughter to many who watched those on social media, it has helped to prevent the people from public gathering and thereby stop further spreading of the virus.

Another prominent factor which facilitated the success of Kerala's pandemic response is its robust health system, that was sufficient enough to execute the plans as outlined by the World Health Organisation. The strong response of the health system in terms of the readiness and preparedness of the health workers was crucial. The co-ordination between different units in health system helped to bring the situation under the control. Facilities were put in place and ambulances were sent to those who developed any symptoms. Constant interaction of health department with patients, meticulous tracing and isolation of the contacts of the patients, presence of medical board of experts in every corona-designated hospital, special care to patients were also helpful in controlling the spread of virus.

The education level and literacy rate of the public in Kerala have also been credited for the successful response of the state to COVID-19. Kerala has the largest proportion of literate people among all the states in India. According to the census of 2011, Kerala's effective literacy rate is 93.91. In Kerala, 91.98 percent of women and 96.02 men are literate which is higher than the 65.46 percent women and 82.14 percent men at all India level (MHA 2011). The literacy of people in Kerala helped the state to successfully run the awareness campaigns to which the people responded with maturity and sensibility. Yasser Arafath also opined that the state's success comes from the idea of citizenship shaped by a high level of literacy and secular sensibilities (Arafath 2020).

Saikat Sinha Roy and Suresh Babu argued that the investment of leadership in development policy over a long time helped to shorten the curve (Roy & Suresh 2020). Kerala is known for its development model of 1970s with a special focus on the development of social sectors such as health and education. An important element that contributed to the flattening of curve is the priority given to public

health and hygiene. High level of general awareness, high female literacy, robust health system with efficient network of medics and paramedics, availability of public goods, efficient public distribution system, community participation, social mobilization, social awareness campaign like 'break the chain campaign' are the factors that helped Kerala to control the pandemic. Most prominently, the social mobilization facilitated by sustained social development policies is the key to Kerala model of pandemic (Roy & Suresh 2020).

The presence of responsible media in the state also helped the society and the state in the efforts to control the pandemic. The ethic and morale of the media in Kerala has been up to the mark during the pandemic situation. When the national media was trying to report the pandemic on communal lines and polarize communities for political mileage, the media in Kerala has shown a model to the other parts of India. There was seldom any attempt to polarize the issues around the pandemic on communal lines. Even though a criticism still exists against the media in Kerala that they have failed to show and explain the differential impact of the lockdown and pandemic on socially vulnerable groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and Women; and also against their incline towards sensationalism, it has shown the maturity and responsibility in comparison with other media at the national level. Many television channels broadcasted 'break the chain' campaigns in order to spread the awareness among the public.

While the major focus has been on the efficiency of government and leadership, police force, frontline health workers, media in explaining the success of Kerala's model of pandemic control, there is one factor which is not themed in many of the analysis which is the nature of social structure and its foundational philosophy within which all these elements interact with each other. The literature on Kerala's model of pandemic control seldom sheds light on the nature of social structure based on enlightenment movement within which the people who represent the governmental machinery and society operate. The prevalence of reason and scientific temper in Kerala's social sphere has largely helped the government to execute its policies and run the awareness campaigns more easily. This article argues that Kerala Social Model based on the enlightenment movement led by the social reformers with a spirit of reason and scientific temper helped the state to emerge as a successful model of pandemic control.

‘Kerala Social Model’ and the Pandemic Response

Kerala Social model is defined as a unique social setting shaped and inspired by an enlightenment movement of nineteenth century. Before analyzing this social model based on the renaissance ideals, it is important to note that Kerala's societal structure is very unique in comparison to other states in India in terms of the existence of a heterogeneous population of different religious communities. One could see various cuisines, dressing style and customs across Kerala. Beef eating has become a common culture of almost all Keralites and not specific to any particular religious community. There is, by and large, a sense of tolerance towards each other's food habits and religious belief. Apparently, there is a certain degree of peace and harmony in the society, even if everything is not perfectly alright in Kerala's social system.

One could still argue that the presence of a heterogonous population act as checks and balances in order to prevent one community from being dominant over the other. It prevents the hegemony of a particular community over the other and stops the homogenization process in the society. The composite culture of Kerala and the subsequent tolerance level of different communities enabled the state to confront the pandemic with a sense of unity and co-operation. The checks and balances due to the composite culture helps the state to halt the political propaganda based on communal lines which makes the management of crisis more focused without any diversions or distractions. This could also be one reason that Kerala hasn't witnessed the polarization of communities based on religion during pandemic as it happened with the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi. There is awareness in the social sphere against any concerted efforts from any particular community or political establishment to divert the real issue, in this case COVID control, which matters to the people and their lives. The social base of Kerala based on the ideals and principles of social reformers could be also one of the explanations of the maturity of the society in dealing with the religious issues and minority communities during the pandemic situation.

Kerala's pandemic response has to be overhauled with a detailed analysis of the nature of its societal structure, largely based on and defined by the values of Kerala's renaissance. Kerala Renaissance movement was led by mainly Dalit and

Bahujan leaders such as Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Vaikunda Swamikal, Poikayil Appachan, Pandit Karuppan. The renaissance in Kerala aimed at eliminating the traditional culture rooted in superstitions and brahmanical ideology. They opposed the feudal and brahmanical values. It has restructured the society of Kerala by fighting against caste and gender oppression which has eventually paved the way for a high literacy rate and upliftment of women's status in Kerala.

The renaissance movement was successful to some extent to bring a structural change, and thereby developing an educated mass which gives priority to progress. The critical thinking nurtured in Kerala's people helped them realize what is good and bad for them as a society and polity. The renaissance movement could break the unreasonable and superstitious ideas that are ingrained in many social, religious and traditional customs such as widow marriage, child marriage, caste, idolatry, priesthood, polytheism etc. The modern outlook replacing the orthodox social propositions in Kerala's society and polity inspired by the renaissance ideals has helped the state to judiciously invest in social sectors such as education and health. In hindsight, this proved to be the most appropriate attitude which helped the state to deal with the current pandemic situation in most successful ways.

Logic and reason are the two most important elements which decide the fate of people during a situation like this pandemic. The development of a social consciousness based on logic and reason is a direct result of the enlightenment movement in Kerala. Sahodaran Ayyappan has put forward his ideas based on reason and logical thinking. His 'Sahodara Prasthanam' influenced many people to bring a reasonable outlook in their lives. When the people in other states were taking processions on the request of the Prime Minister to respect the frontline workers by clapping or tapping on plates, people in Kerala abstained from such foolish and illogical act of moving in groups realizing the importance of physical distancing between people during the pandemic time. When videos circulating on social media showing people chanting 'go corona go' slogans and worshipping 'Corona Devi', Kerala government and society kept away from such illogical dramatic events during a crucial time because of the foundational teachings of the renaissance leaders such as Sahodaran Ayyappan. Kerala's social and

political clout have its roots in the solid legacy of a renaissance movement.

The legacy of Kerala's renaissance is still upheld by many individuals and independent organizations. The presence of an active independent platform of logical thinking such as "Kerala Free Thinkers Forum" is an example of it. They still strive to spread the ideas of enlightenment thinkers and social reformers in contemporary Kerala. This response to the pandemic was also a result of the modern outlook, ethical conceptions, and moral lessons inherited from the past history of enlightenment movement. The importance given to the education by the renaissance leaders helped Kerala to respond to the pandemic with more responsibility. Education is an important medium to generate social consciousness and also shape the logical human minds. The successful co-ordination and interaction between the government and people can be better explained by the literate people of the state. People were ready to comply with the rules and follow the instructions of the government. The scientific temper flourished among the common public in Kerala has facilitated the smooth functioning of the pandemic control operations.

The reflection of the renaissance moorings was also reflected in the leadership. When the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was asked to comment on PM's call to light candles on April 15, he replied that "we should be able to bring the right kind of brightness into the minds of thousands and thousands of people, both small and big" (Krishnakumar 2020). This deep awareness and understanding of dealing with real issues instead of some symbolic ritualistic acts not only rooted in his positioning in a Marxist ideology, but also influenced by the social structure enmeshed in the progressive ideals of renaissance which he is a part of. His nuanced understanding and consciousness emanate from the legacy of the ideals of enlightenment movement which was a catalyst to bring social awakening through the creation of spaces of critical thinking. In a nutshell, it could be argued that the success of Kerala in responding to pandemic is a result of the long-term struggle of its great social leaders who paved a strong social foundation of logic, reason, scientific temper, moral sense and ethical ideals.

Conclusion

The success of Kerala Model of containing the pandemic is the culmination of an efficient governmental management of the situation and a proper co-ordination between the state and society in fighting the virus. However, it is also important to understand Kerala's pandemic response within the framework of a reformed social structure based on renaissance movement which facilitated the people in the society and the leaders of the government to act according to the reason and logic in controlling the pandemic. The people who run the government and those responding to the government are in a societal structure which has its ideological foundations largely based on the enlightenment movement in Kerala led by social reformers in the state. In other words, the people who constitute the government, health system and society are largely drawn from a societal structure which is influenced by the ideals and principles of Kerala's renaissance. The reasonable behavior of the government and the mature consciousness of the society rooted in renaissance thought played a more pivotal role in successfully controlling the pandemic in the state. The major lesson from the Kerala model of pandemic response for other states and other parts of the world is that it's not just a result of the swift government management, but a long time investment of the social thought and enlightenment initiatives of great leaders which transformed the social thinking of the people, and thereby defined the administration in the body politic too.

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