

Kerala's Education System: From Inclusion to Exclusion?

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The paper examines the recent shifts in Kerala's education system from an inclusive to an exclusive one. The pendulum seems to be swinging from one extreme to the other, from a highly subsidised and a largely state-sponsored and state-supported system to a mostly self-financing system, a euphemism for a student-financed commercial system. This paper examines the economic, social and political forces that led to this shift, almost tectonic in scale. It also examines the long-term consequences of such a shift to Kerala's economy and society.

It goes to the credit of Kerala that it has achieved all the millennium development goals set for education, much ahead of time. As is well known, Kerala was the first state to have achieved universal literacy. There is near universal school enrolment. The dropout rate is very low in schools. The state has been able to reduce the wide disparities in literacy and enrolment at all levels between the Malabar region of the erstwhile Madras Presidency and the regions covered by the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

1 Inclusive Features

More than 94% of the rural population is served by primary school/section within a distance of 1 km while 98% of population has got one school within a distance of 2 km. More than 96% of the population is served by an upper primary school/section within a distance of 3 km. Nearly 98% of the rural population has the facility for secondary education within 8 km.¹ Facilities for higher and technical education too are available to rural students at a reasonable distance. Besides, the widespread availability of public transport system and the highly subsidised transport fares² have facilitated an easy access for rural students to higher educational institutions in towns and cities.

Another feature of Kerala's educational system is that it developed mainly through institutions that are owned or aided by the government. There are no fees at any level in schools. The fees are very low in the higher education and technical education institutions that are owned or aided by the government. The ratio of recovery of government's revenue expenditure was only 2.6% in 2006-07.

Kerala's education system has been able to achieve gender equity in enrolment to a large extent. Nearly half of the students in lower primary classes are girls. There is not much gender disparity in the pre-primary school enrolment either (CSES 2002). The proportion of girls is higher in higher classes in schools. This proportion is much higher in arts and science colleges both at the graduate and postgraduate levels. The representation of girls in professional courses is, however, comparatively low. Among the teachers in schools, the presence of female teachers is around 70% in Kerala as against 50% in the country. In arts and science colleges, female teachers constitute around 50%.

The literacy rates for scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) population, though lower than those of the general population in the state, are higher than the literacy rates for the general population in India. SC students constitute 10.7% and ST students 1.2% of the total enrolment in schools. Their share in enrolment is commensurate with their share in the schoolgoing age group population (10.4% for SCs and 1.2% for STs). The share of SC and ST students in enrolment

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in higher education also is commensurate with their share in the total population of the state, which is 9.8% and 1.1%, respectively.

2 Exclusionary Trends

Several micro-level studies indicate that the situation is not as rosy as suggested by the aggregate statistics described above. These studies revealed that the aggregate statistics camouflage some of the major differences in the educational achievements of people belonging to different socio-economic groups. Exclusionary trends have been getting stronger since 1990s. This is mainly because of four factors: (1) increase in private costs to be incurred by students, (2) growth of student-financed institutions, (3) strengthening of non-financial entry barriers, and (4) inadequate attention to the problems of the disadvantaged groups.

2.1 Increase in Private Costs

As noted earlier, students do not have to pay any fees in the government and aided schools. The fees in the arts and science colleges, which are in the government and aided sectors, are also low. The absence of fees or low fees, however, does not imply low cost of education to the students. Data brought out by the 61st round of National Sample Survey (2004-05) show that, on an average, the per capita expenditure on education by the rural households in Kerala was more than double the national average (Rs 41 for Kerala against Rs 18 for India). In terms of the per capita educational expenditure in rural areas, Kerala ranked third after Haryana and Punjab. But urban India was spending more than urban Kerala (Rs 74 for India against Rs 66 for Kerala). The survey reveals that rural-urban difference in educational spending by households was much less in Kerala than in the country as a whole. The survey also points out that the proportion of households spending on private tuition/coaching is much higher in rural Kerala than in rural India (17% in rural Kerala and 8% in rural India). However, this proportion is only marginally higher in urban Kerala compared to urban India (17% in urban Kerala and 16% in urban India).

A study of schools (Nair 2004) on the household costs of school education in Kerala has shown that the percentage of students receiving private tuition ranged from 6.7% in the pre-primary schools to 34.1% in high schools. These ratios were 11.8% for lower primary schools, 21.5% for upper primary schools and 29.6% for higher secondary.

Though no fee is charged on the students, it is not free for the beneficiaries of education as they have to incur costs of several types (special fees, examination fees, cost of reading and writing materials, clothing, travelling, study tours, donation to parent-teacher association (PTA), private tuition, etc). Based on a survey conducted in a sample of schools in Ernakulam district, Namoothiri (2004) placed the annual private cost of students in government schools at Rs 2,313, Rs 2,992 and Rs 4,676 in lower primary, upper primary and high school sections, respectively. The corresponding figures for the aided schools are Rs 3,019, Rs 3,356 and Rs 4,421. In unaided schools, private costs were much higher at Rs 9,100, Rs 9,281 and Rs 10,608. The study revealed that the private costs of the students in government and aided schools at the upper primary and high school levels are more than the government spending towards recurring expenses on these students.

CSES (1997) study on entry barriers to professional education had shown that the subsidised tuition fees in government engineering colleges constituted only 3% of the total private costs of students residing in hostels or lodges for their studies. In the case of students residing with their parents, the proportion is low at 6%. Even if we take only academic expenses, fees formed only one-third of such expenses of graduate engineering students. Total academic expenses themselves formed only 34.3% of the total expenses even for day scholars. In the case of resident students, academic expenses constituted only 15.2% of their total private costs. The study found that the private expenses of an engineering student in the government college, who was staying away from her/his home for studies, was more than half of the average household income of Kerala.

The study on medical education by Ajith Kumar (2004) comes to similar findings. The study, which covered only students in the government medical colleges found that about 90% of the cost of education incurred by the students, is on non-fee expenses. The share of academic expenses is only 27% in the case of students staying in hostels or lodges and 40% in the case of day scholars. The yearly educational expenses – academic and maintenance incurred by the families of a medical student were higher than the average household income of the low income group. It implies that medical education is beyond the reach of these groups as the scholarships cover only a fraction of the private costs. In the case of lower middle income group families, the average private cost was more than 50% of the household income. For the middle income families, the corresponding proportion is nearly one-third. It is clear that, in spite of low fees, the cost of medical education even in the subsidised government-owned/aided system places heavy burden on lower income, lower middle income and middle income families. For families of these income groups, it would be virtually impossible to finance the higher education of two children from their current income, even when one of them pursues an arts or science course. CSES (1997) and Kumar (2004) clearly indicate that high costs of education act as an entry barrier to majority of the families in the state.

The government's subsidy policy covers only fees which is only a small component of the private costs. It does not have a comprehensive policy of means-cum-merit scholarship to cover the total private costs of students from low income households. The criterion for eligibility for scholarship is too restrictive to be effective.³ Besides, the scholarship covers only a tiny fraction of the total private costs of students.

2.2 Growth of Student-Financed Institutions

A major trend noticed since the 1990s which has aggravated the exclusionary trend is the proliferation of unaided schools and the growth of self-financing courses and institutions in the higher education and technical education sectors. The education scene in Kerala has always been dominated by private agencies. What is new is the growth of the unaided component of the private sector. These institutions try to recover the entire capital and recurring costs from the students as they are considered to be the sole beneficiaries of education. Many of the new breed of educational entrepreneurs is guided largely by commercial considerations. Even the religious

and the caste groups which used to finance education partly out of their own resources are now choosing the easier option of student-financing for promoting education. The universities and some of the government agencies⁴ and cooperatives floated at the initiative of the government are now starting only student-funded colleges. Most of the job-oriented courses like nursing, medical, engineering, management are now in the self-financing sector (Table 1).

Table 1: Ownership of Educational Institutions in 1991 and 2007-08

Type of Institution	1991					2007-08				
	Govt Regular	Aided	Unaided	Total	% of Unaided in Total	Govt Regular	Aided	Unaided	Total	% of Unaided in Total
LP schools	2,565	4,068	134	6,767	2.0	2,548	3,992	277	6,817	4.1
UP schools	960	1,883	72	2,915	2.5	954	1,870	213	3,037	7.0
High schools	960	1,380	111	2,451	4.5	996	1,428	366	2,790	13.1
Higher secondary schools	49	37	0	86	0.0	729	529	439	1,697	25.9
VHSE schools	179	7	0	186	0.0	261	128	0	389	0.0
ITI/ITC	28	-	274	302	90.7	76	-	354	430	82.3
Arts and science colleges	40	132	0	172	0.0	39	150	153	342	44.7
Polytechnics	24	6	0	30	0.0	43	6	9	58	15.5
Engineering colleges	5	3	0	8	0.0	11	3	72	86	83.7
Medical colleges	5	0	0	5	0.0	5	0	8	13	61.5
Ayurveda colleges	3	2	1	6	16.7	3	2	8	13	61.5
Dental colleges	2	0	0	2	0.0	3	0	6	9	66.7
Homoeo colleges	2	3	0	5	0.0	2	3	0	5	0.0
Nursing colleges	3	0	0	3	0.0	5	0	42	47	89.4
Pharmacy colleges	1	0	0	1	0.0	2	0	17	19	89.5

Source: *Economic Review 1991* and 2007, Government of Kerala.

More than 80% of the engineering colleges, nursing colleges, nursing schools and pharmacy colleges are in the self-financing stream. More than three-fifths of the institutions offering medical courses in different streams such as allopathy, ayurveda and homoeopathy are also self-financing in nature. Of the arts and science colleges in the state, 45% are now in the self-financing stream.

The private aided colleges, which dominated the arts and science college sector contributing to more than three-fourths of the number of colleges in 1991, have now a share of only 44%. Their expansion is now mostly in the self-financing mode. In 2007-08, the self-financing arts and science colleges outnumbered the aided colleges. Their number stood at 153. They now constitute 45% of the total number of arts and science colleges in the state. Most of the newly started job-oriented courses are now conducted on self-financing basis, either in the newly started unaided institutions or in the existing aided colleges themselves. The share of government has shown a small improvement in the case of industrial training centres (ITCs). But the ITCs were largely in the private sector even in 1991.

In Table 1, only unaided schools which are recognised by the state government have been counted. In addition to these schools, there are schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and Indian Council of Secondary Education (ICSE). There are a large number of schools, which are not recognised by any central or state agency. Therefore, the share of unaided sector in the state's school education system is much more than the figures reported in Table 1. Table 2 provides more details on the number of unaided schools in the state. It indicates that different types of unaided schools together form more than one-fourth of the total number of schools in the state. Schools which are not recognised by any central or state agency constituted 16.5% of the

schools. These schools are functioning as per the provisions of the Kerala Education Rules which allow private study up to standard IV.

Another phenomenon in the education sector is the rapid increase in the number of non-formal educational institutions. These are not affiliated to any university or government. Most of them offer job-oriented courses and are run purely on commercial basis. There is no reliable estimate of the number of these institutions or the students enrolled in them. However, there are reasons to believe that their number is not small.

2.3 Non-Financial Entry Barriers

The CSes (1997) study quoted earlier brings to light the non-financial barriers to enter the professional courses. The study finds that the students of government schools and rural schools found it difficult to get admission to these courses. The students of Malayalam medium schools have only a marginal representation. The first generation students, whose parental education is low are not finding it easy to get admission. So is the case with the children of agriculturists and self-employed. There is also a gender bias. The study points out the huge disparities in the educational standards at the

school level as a major factor contributing to the strengthening of the entry barriers.

The CSes (1997) study and Kumar (2004) identify entrance tests as another entry barrier. These studies find that vast majority of the students getting admission to the professional courses had their entrance coaching in the cities. The proximity to better coaching centres gives an advantage to urban students. Fees constitute only one of the components of the costs of entrance coaching. Students in rural areas have to incur considerably more expenses for transport or for living in lodges. These high costs strengthen the entry barriers against the rural and poor students. While entrance tests are praised for their value in providing a common yardstick for comparing students from diverse schools with different grading standards, no decision has been taken by the government to remove the existing biases in the entrance tests or to make them more effective in assessing the aptitudes of students and in measuring

Table 2: Schooling in Kerala Up To Class X in 2006-07

Type of School	No of Schools	Share in Total Number of Schools
Government or aided		
State government schools	4,498	28.1
Private schools aided by the state government	7,290	45.5
Kendriya Vidyalaya	26	0.2
Navodaya Vidyalaya	14	0.1
Sub-total – government or aided	11,828	73.8
Private unaided schools		
Recognised by the state government	856	5.3
Approved by CBSE	587	3.7
Approved by ICSE	100	0.6
Unrecognised unaided schools	2,646	16.5
Sub-total – private unaided	4,189	26.2
Total	16,017	100.0

Source: Government of Kerala (2008): *Economic Review 2007* and Government of Kerala (2007): Report of the Survey on Unrecognised schools in Kerala.

their abilities in completing the course successfully. Such an improvement is particularly relevant as the coaching for entrance tests is harming the state's education system in other ways too.⁵

2.4 Inadequate Attention to Disadvantaged Groups

George (2001), surveying the below poverty line (BPL) families in one rural area and one urban periphery in the state, has found that the enrolment ratio of the poor is very low in the higher classes. The ratio is cent per cent at the primary level (age 6 to 11) and 66.7% at the middle school level (age 11 to 14). At the secondary level (age 14 to 18), the ratio falls drastically to 25%. The enrolment ratio among the poor at the higher education level (age 18 and above) is very poor at 1.9. The Human Development Report for Kerala (2005) comes to the conclusion that the deprived groups (sc/st and Other Backward Castes (OBC) groups) lag behind the others in the achievement of this basic functioning.

We have noticed earlier that the overall statistics indicate gender equity in education. However, the CSES study on Alternative Schools (2003) and the study by Tharakan et al (2004) on Kerala's education system bring out several instances of gender stereotyping in the learning materials. Such gender stereotyping may lead to exclusion of women from the mainstream and make them lag behind their male counterparts in active social and political participation. This may be a reason for the inability of women in the state to convert their achievements in education into practical achievements in the real world.

We have noted earlier that the share of SC and ST communities in school enrolment is almost the same as their share in the population in the schoolgoing age group. A comparison of the caste composition of students in unaided schools and government/aided schools, however, provides indications of exclusion. The share of SC and ST in enrolment in unaided schools recognised by the state government in 2007-08 was just 3.3% and 0.4%, respectively. As against this, the share of these groups in the enrolment in government schools is much higher at 13.5% and 2.7%, respectively. In the aided schools, the shares of SC and ST in enrolment were 10.5% and 1.1%, respectively. It is also to be noted that SC and ST students lag behind in their performance in the secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC) examinations. The percentage of pass in SSLC examination of March 2007 was 65.7 for SC students and 60.7 for ST students, while the overall pass percentage was 82.2 (GOK 2008).

Studying a marine fishing village in Thiruvananthapuram district, George and Domi (2002) have found that the marine fishing community has been largely left out of the achievements of the Kerala's educational development. Their study indicates high dropouts and low achievement levels among the children of marine fish workers.

3 Economic Factors

The exclusionary trends got strengthened due to the failure of the state to improve the quality of schooling and increase the intake capacity of professional education institutions, when the demand for better quality schooling and professional education were growing. The failure of the government was taking place when the capacity of a large number of households to pay for education was increasing due to a number of reasons such as growth in per capita state domestic product (SDP), expansion of job markets both

within the country and abroad, inflow of remittances, decrease in the number of children, reduction in household size, etc.⁶

3.1 Growth Trends in Disposable Income

The capacity of the households to meet the increasing private costs of education depends, to some extent, on the household income. In the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s, the growth in per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) was quite low.⁷ But Kerala economy has been coming out of the stagnation phase from 1987-88 onwards. In addition to the increasing income originating within the state, there was also a large quantum of remittances received from the outmigrants (to other states) and emigrants (to other countries) from Kerala. The importance of migration to Kerala economy may be gauged from the fact that one-fourth of the households have a non-resident Keralite. The annual remittances from the emigrants increased from Rs 13,652 crore in 1999 to Rs 18,465 crore in 2003 and further to Rs 24,269 crore in 2006-07. It is estimated that the remittances to Kerala from its emigrants to other countries alone were equivalent to one-fifth of NSDP (Zachariah and Rajan 2007). This flow of income made a large number of households capable of pursuing education. But this increase in financial capacity was not shared by all households. The distribution of income from both domestic production and remittances has been quite uneven.⁸

3.2 Fiscal Crisis and Change in Priorities

When the capacity of a section of households for spending has been increasing due to a number of factors discussed above, the government's capacity and willingness for public spending on education has been coming down. Despite the large volume of external remittances to the state and despite the recovery of its economy in the 1990s, the state government has been facing recurrent fiscal crisis. This has been adduced as a major reason by the state government for reducing budget allocation to the education sector. The state sought to reduce revenue deficit by drastic compression of expenditure rather than by raising additional resources. In fact, the own revenue of the state in relation to its SDP declined from 1989-90 onwards. The state's own resource mobilisation efforts were lower in the 1990s than in the 1980s despite the turnaround of the economy. The decrease in central revenue transfers also contributed to the fiscal crisis (George and Krishnakumar 2003).

We had seen earlier that the high growth in per capita income, increased flow of external remittances, the reduced size of the households and the lower number of children have increased the capacity of a large number of households to bear a larger share of the cost of education. But despite these favourable developments, the rate of recovery of revenue expenditure on education by way of fees has been coming down. This declining cost recovery aggravated, to some extent, the financial crisis of both the government and the educational institutions.

3.3 Declining Share of Expenditure on Education

Public expenditure on education remained high when the state income was growing very slowly. The proportion of revenue expenditure on education to SDP in 1970-71 was 4.8%. By 1980-81, the proportion went up further to 6.1% (Mitra 1999). But by 2004-05, the proportion came down to just 3.3%.

Kerala, in the past, was spending much beyond its economic capacity on social sectors because it had the right priorities. Kerala's development experience, therefore, used to be described in the past as the paradox of high degree of social development despite low rates of economic growth. But when the economy started growing, the state shifted its priorities away from education. As a result, the state reduced the share of education in its total expenditure (revenue and capital) as may be seen from Table 3. The share of education came down from 27.4% during the Fifth Plan period to 18.6% during the five-year period ended in 2006-07. It may be recalled that the erstwhile Travancore-Cochin state had spent a much higher proportion (26%) of its budget on education in 1954-55 (Nair 1981).

Table 3: Share of Education, Art, Culture and Scientific Research in Budgeted Expenditure (from 1992-93 to 2006-07, figures in percentages)

Plan Periods	Revenue Expenditure	Capital Expenditure	Total Expenditure	Plan Expenditure	Non-Plan Expenditure
VIII Kerala	25.20	5.70	23.61	6.55	28.64
	All states	19.74	2.56	17.92	8.66
IX Kerala	21.72	3.32	20.67	5.65	25.14
	All states	20.31	1.98	18.56	10.04
X Kerala	19.24	3.64	18.60	4.58	22.02
	All states	17.75	2.00	15.60	8.34

Capital outlay is taken as capital expenditure. It does not include loans and advances by the state government. Source: Computed from *State Finances*, various issues, Reserve Bank of India.

The reduction in government expenditure affected all types of expenditures, particularly the plan expenditure and the capital expenditure. The share of plan expenditure on education in the total plan expenditure of the state (including expenditure on central and centrally-sponsored schemes routed through the state budget) had come down from 6.6% during the Eighth Plan to 5.7% in the Ninth Plan and to 4.6% during the Tenth Plan. The above share of Kerala was lower than the average of all states during all the above periods. The share of education in the capital expenditure of the state came down from 5.7% during the Eighth Plan to 3.3% in the Ninth Plan and then marginally improved to 3.6% during the Tenth Plan. This drastic reduction in plan expenditure as well as capital expenditure prevented the government from expanding capacity of government owned and government aided institutions in the higher education and technical education sectors when the demand for them was growing. This vacuum was filled initially by the self-financing institutions in other states to which there was a massive exodus of students from Kerala. Later on, the newly established self-financing institutions within the state met this demand. The government considered the starting of large number of such institutions as a softer option. The under-investment by the government *inter alia* led to erosion in quality of institutions owned and aided by it, thus increasing the private cost for the students of the institutions, a trend noted earlier.

4 Social and Political Factors

The expansion of unaided/self-financing system can be traced partly to the emergence of a new middle class in the state. An indication of the emergence of this middle class can be seen from the large proportion of households owning luxury goods such as large houses, automobiles, jewellery, telephones, television sets, etc. This proportion is much higher in Kerala than in the country as a whole (NSSO 2007). This emerging middle class is both prepared

for and is capable of buying its way in the educational sector. Many of the less educated but rich members of this class find education as a means for social mobility and respectability.

There is a growing tendency for the middle class to opt out of the government-owned and aided educational system avowedly because of its low quality, but also due to social reasons. This tendency to quit the government system of education by the vocal and influential middle class, in turn, has led to further deterioration of the system and the expansion of the unaided sector. A vicious circle thus seems to be closing in. Put in other words, large sections of the people of Kerala are gradually losing their stakes in the government system whether it is of education or healthcare (George and Tharakan 2005). This, in turn, has led to their unwillingness to pay for these public services. It is this vocal segment of population with increasing political influence and financial clout, which now sets the agenda in the discourses on education and politics in the state. This, in turn, has led to the shifting of priorities of public spending away from social services, which the middle class is no longer availing.

There are a number of factors behind the formation of the middle class. Higher education itself has helped the formation of this class. Those who have received higher education, thanks to the large subsidy from the government in the past, have themselves moved into the new middle class. The growth of commercial agriculture and employment in industry and the service sectors has also contributed to the growth of this class. Land reforms helped the erstwhile tenants who were mostly belonging to middle castes and communities to throw away the feudal yoke and to become middle peasants. International migration has also helped in the formation of the middle class.

Expanding educational opportunities irrespective of regions, religions, castes and classes, was top most in the agenda of all the political parties in the past. State funding of education directly or through liberal grants-in-aid to private agencies (an earlier version of today's public-private participation) helped the process of expanding educational opportunities. Till recently, the need for subsidising education by the government was not a contested issue among the political parties. It is this political consensus in the state, which had contributed to the Kerala model of educational and social development. But the political parties today do not have any clear strategy of protecting the gains of the Kerala model of development from the onslaught of privatisation and marketisation emanating from within and outside the country. Part of the reason for this situation lies in the growing influence of the affluent middle class in all political parties. Besides, avowedly due to the fiscal crisis from the middle of the 1980s, all the political parties had gone, to varying degrees, for the easier option of leaving the system to the market. They do not seem to have any new strategy for keeping the system inclusive against the odds of changing environment within and outside the state.

Due to historical reasons, both the demand for and supply of educational opportunities were created largely by religious groups and community organisations. The educational development in the state was spearheaded by Christian missionaries, local parishes, Nair Service Society (NSS), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDPY) and the Muslim Educational Society (Nair 1981; Tharakan 1984). Those agencies were guided by the educational and social needs of both their own communities and the society

around. Some of these private agencies were instrumental in taking education to backward regions, castes and socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Girls' education was also promoted by some of these agencies. The resources for starting schools and colleges were mobilised from the locality or from within the community using a variety of very ingenious techniques. Fees from the students constituted only one of the resources meant to meet at best, the recurrent expenditure. In other words, privatisation did not lead to commercialisation of education. The state supported these agencies in a number of ways (George et al 2003). As in the case of political parties, the present leadership of these community organisations, which were formed in the wake of the social reform movements, no longer has got any lofty agenda. Unlike the earlier leaders of these organisations, the new leaders lack a clear vision regarding the desirable course for Kerala society. New initiatives to address the educational needs of the marginalised communities and the poor even in their own communities seldom comes from these community organisations.

All the religious and caste organisations in the course of time developed into pressure groups (George 1998). From the very beginning, they had developed a strong clout in Kerala politics. In fact, new political parties have been formed, largely to protect the interests of some of these communities. Kathleen Gough had brought out clearly the essentially communal character of the political movements in Kerala way back in 1969. She wrote:

The correlation between caste, rank and party support raises the question of 'casteism' in Kerala politics... All parties in their efforts to control more seats jockey for influence with one or another communal association, NSS, SNDP, Muslim League and Catholic Church (Gough 1969).⁹

The whole politics of Kerala thus came to be dominated by these organisations, which had developed a vested interest in the issue of ownership and control of educational institutions and not on the education of the deprived.

The political clout of the educational agencies and communal organisations was so strong that it could defeat all attempts to curtail the unhealthy labour practices of the private managements, made repeatedly by the rulers of Travancore and subsequently by both the Communist and Congress governments (Mathew 1989). As a result, none of the governments, whether under United Democratic Front (UDF) or Left Democratic Front (LDF)¹⁰ has been able to curtail the widespread corruption, nepotism and communalisation in appointment of teachers in aided schools and colleges. Since a large number of educational institutions are run by minority religious groups like Christians and Muslims, the minority rights enshrined in the Constitution become an added weapon to protect their community and economic interests in education.¹¹ The increase in corruption and the nepotism in the appointment of teachers in private educational institutions has also led to the exclusion of teachers from poor economic backgrounds to enter the teaching profession.

5 Implications

At the beginning of this paper, we have noted some of the laudable aspects of Kerala's educational development, which have been taken cognisance of by both scholars and development agencies. Some of the trends in the 1990s and afterwards, however, are

threatening to undermine these achievements and their beneficial impact on Kerala society. Commercialisation, communalisation and politicisation are now entering the educational system in a big way with possible long-term consequences to the whole Kerala society. It is likely to undermine the inclusive features of the nationally and internationally applauded Kerala model of development.

The social and economic mobility made possible by the educational system in the past is now becoming near impossible due to the commercialisation of education at all levels. It appears that while the passports to unemployment are issued to every one through subsidised general education, often of low quality, the same to employment opportunities are issued only to the elite groups, carved out on the basis of their financial and social background, which can afford the full cost of education (cses 1997). This inequitable growth trend and the consequent denial of opportunities to large segments of society for upward mobility can adversely affect the state's relatively high degree of social stability and harmony.

Almost all discussions on self-financing educational institutions highlight mostly the financial and equity issues. The impact of commercialisation on the quality of education and the capabilities of the educated manpower are not receiving due attention. The performance of the students in self-financing colleges affiliated to Kerala University shows that it is much below that of students in government owned or aided colleges.¹² The two government engineering colleges (College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram and Government Engineering College, Thiruvananthapuram) and the private engineering college (TKM College of Engineering, Kollam) aided by the government under the University of Kerala together had a pass percentage of 67.3%. As against this, the self-financing colleges (in the government sector and the private sector) together could achieve a pass percentage of only 35.6%. Some of the self-financing colleges in the private sector could manage to get only a pass percentage of 10-15%. Kulavelil (2008) brings out the performance of the BTech students in the Cochin University of Science and Technology, which runs the BTech courses on a self-financing basis. The pass percentage for BTech was just 33%. Out of the 3,100 students who appeared for the examinations, 2,077 failed.

Many studies have shown that the reach of the self-financing professional institutions is limited to only 5-10% of the households in the state (Kumar 2004; Salim 2004; cses 1997). This implies that these institutions, and consequently, the state are not able to tap the diversity of talents, backgrounds, attitudes and creativity of the vast majority of young persons. The long-term consequences of this development to the competitiveness of the state's economy, operating in an increasingly human capital-driven world economy are not yet receiving the attention they deserve from the opinion leaders and policymakers in the state, engrossed as they are with short-term financial considerations.

At the school level, a new generation of students who have little knowledge of the local language, literature, culture, history and even geography is emerging in the state. They are a socially disengaged lot insulated from the Kerala society. The concept of neighbourhood schools is now at a discount as students are transported over long distances. These students are disconnected from their neighbourhood and lack local community identity and feelings. Two classes of students seem to be emerging in the state and

in each locality with very little opportunities for interaction with each other. Most of the students in the unaided schools come from more or less similar socio-economic backgrounds. Without the physical proximity of and social interaction with the underprivileged, which were provided by public institutions like government and government aided schools, the middle class in

Kerala can never again hope to vocalise the genuine aspirations of the less privileged. They no more are effective participants of public action. Long-term consequences of the recent developments in education on Kerala society have not yet been understood and therefore are not yet part of the political discourse in the state.

NOTES

1 In spite of wide coverage of school education, there are still areas, mostly in the tribal belts, which do not have adequate schooling facilities in their neighbourhood.

2 Students have to pay only 15-20% of the normal fare.

3 The state makes only a very token effort to help the poor families. Except for SC/ST students, the lump sum grants do not cover even a fraction of the maintenance expenses. Fee waiver is provided to non-SC/ST students belonging to the low income groups irrespective of religion and caste based on the recommendations of the Kumara Pillai Commission Report (KPCR). The family income limit fixed for eligibility for KPCR scholarship is Rs 42,000 (Rs 3,500 per month). In order to become eligible for availing nominal pocket money under KPCR, the income limit should be still lower at Rs 36,000. The very low income limits and the incapability of these scholarships to finance the non-fee private costs make them ineffective to remove the entry barriers of poor students.

4 The main agencies in the government's self-financing sector are the Institute of Human Resource Development (IHRD) and LBS Centre for Science and Technology. Some of the other government agencies do not have any credentials to run professional colleges. Such agencies include Kerala State Road Transport Corporation and the Centre for Continuing Education. The NORKA (Non-resident Keralites Department of the Government of Kerala) also has recently announced their plans to start self-financing professional colleges avowedly for the benefit of non-resident Keralites. On the pretext of the lack of social control of the government over the private self-financing institutions, the government promoted the formation of student-funded professional colleges in the cooperative sector. The societal control of the latter is debatable.

5 At present, the performance of students in the Plus 2 level examinations has no bearing on the admissions to professional courses. This results in a situation whereby the students neglect their regular studies at the Plus 2 level and concentrate on preparing for entrance examination. Consequently, even those who finally settle for the graduate level courses in the arts and science colleges will be inadequately prepared leading to lowering of the quality of education in sciences and humanities in the state.

6 One of the biggest achievements of Kerala from the 1970s was in controlling the birth rate. The crude birth rate had come down from 25.0 during 1974-80 to 20.3 during 1984-90 and to 17.1 during 1994-2001. As a result, there was a decline in the number of children; the number declined from 89 lakhs in 1981 to 86 lakhs in 1991 and further to 74 lakhs in 2001. There was also a decline in the size of the households. According to census data, the average size of a household in Kerala was 5.8 persons in 1981 and 5.3 persons in 1991. It came down to 4.7 persons by 2001.

7 The annual compound growth rates during these decades were only 1.41%, 0.45% and 1.87%, respectively. These rates were lower than the growth rates for the country as a whole (K K Subramanian 2003).

8 According to the study by Himanshu (2007), the inequality measured by Gini ratios has worsened both in rural and urban areas of Kerala between 1993-94 and 2004-05. The Gini ratio for the rural areas of Kerala increased from 30.1 in 1993-94 to

38.3 in 2004-05. Similarly, the ratio for urban areas of Kerala increased from 34.3 to 41.0 during the same period.

- 9 There is a flip side to educational development promoted by the religious and caste groups. As the Census of Travancore, 1931 (quoted in Nair 1981) noted, "The spread of education, instead of helping the break-up of the barriers separating one caste from another has only strengthened them in some respects... They remain as exclusive as ever... Each caste wants to continue as a separate unit of the body politic, so that its interests may not suffer from want of advocacy." The educated persons belonging to different communities though basically communal in their attitudes towards social, political and economic problems combined to make a new influential middle class section which managed to arrogate themselves leadership positions in almost all the social and political organisations in the state. This is one of the reasons why, in spite of the spread of education among the masses, political movements in Kerala are wagged by communal organisations to a large extent.
- 10 The United Democratic Front is led by the Congress(I) and the Left Democratic Front is led by the CPI(M). These fronts form government alternately in the state.
- 11 It may be noted in this context that, the share of minority religions in Kerala's population is much higher than in the country. Muslims constitute one-fourth (24.7%) of the population as against 12.4% in the country. The share of Christians in the population is nearly one-fifth (19.0%) as against 2.3% in the country.
- 12 College-wise data on the pass percentage for different engineering courses under the University of Kerala are available at www.kucc.keralauniversity.edu viewed on 12 December 2008.

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