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Kerala's Election: Signposts and a Paradox

Because of its position as a long-time bastion of communist parties and its progress in health and well-being, election trends and results in the southern Indian State of Kerala are invariably watched with special interest. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) is expected to win the poll on 16 May 2016, and thus continue the Kerala tradition of ousting incumbent governments. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) aims to win seats in Kerala for the first time and thereby signal the demise of the CPI(M). Chief Minister Oommen Chandy's Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), in power for the past five years, struggles desperately to hang on. The next government will face major financial and environmental challenges. Kerala's relative prosperity, based on remittances from more than two million Keralites working overseas, means growing environmental degradation. Governments, committed to longstanding social programs, lack funds for much-needed infrastructure. And in spite of its famed level of female literacy and favourable sex ratio, few women participate in Kerala's politics.

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Kerala's reputation for social development and political competition gives its elections a significance that outweighs its size. The State comprises just over one per cent of India's land area and about 3 per cent of its people – 35 million people in 39,000 square kilometres.

But when Malayalis vote in 140 constituencies in the State elections on 16 May 2016, analysts will be searching for greater significance in the result than in similar elections elsewhere.

First, Keralites are expected to follow a time-honoured tradition and defeat the incumbent government led by the Congress Party. Keralites have been tossing out ruling parties regularly for 50 years. If they fail to do so on this occasion, commentators would begin to write obituaries for Kerala's communist parties which lead the opposition and in the normal course of Kerala politics would be expected to win this election.

For outsiders, however, the most keenly awaited outcome is the performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is backing candidates in every constituency. The remarkable victory of the BJP in elections to India's Parliament two years ago suggested that it was riding a wave that would power it into government in State elections around the country. Major defeats in Delhi and Bihar last year, however, dampened that prospect.

The BJP has never won a seat in Kerala, but in local-government elections in November 2015, it got 13 per cent of the vote. Its candidates won control of one municipal government (Palakkad) and 14 (out of more than 900) gram panchayats, the smallest unit of rural government.²

The BJP would greet victory even in two or three seats in Kerala with rejoicing, since such triumphs could be portrayed as the beginning of the end for Kerala's communist parties. The long-time communist citadel in West Bengal fell five years ago and does not look like being retaken in the elections going on there now. Moreover, a close result in Kerala might allow the BJP, if it held two or three seats, to play a king-making role out of proportion to the numbers. On the other hand, if the BJP gets less than 10 per cent of the vote and loses every seat, the result will signal that a nation-wide love affair with the Hindu right is still some way off.

² J. Prabhash, "Kerala Civic Polls 2015," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 December 2015, p. 19.

From the first general elections in 1951-2, Kerala has had closely-fought, two-party politics. Alliances form around the Congress and the Communists. Kerala's two communist parties – the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) – are among the world's great survivors. Their multi-party Left Democratic Front (LDF) came within a whisker of retaining office at the last election in 2011 when it won 68 out of the 140 seats.

The outgoing government, led by the Congress, the largest party in the United Democratic Front (UDF), squeaked a narrow win in the 2011 elections. The Congress won 39 of the six-party coalition's 73 seats, and Oommen Chandy, a Congress leader, became Chief Minister.

Mr Chandy, 72, has been a Congress politician and legislator for nearly 50 years, having begun as a student leader, first elected to the Kerala legislature in 1970. He is a "Syrian Christian," belonging to the Malankara Orthodox sect. If that sounds complicated, it is. Kerala's social and religious divisions and affiliations are as integral to its politics as corn is to cornflakes. The population is 55 per cent Hindu, 27 per cent Muslim and 18 per cent Christian. Christians are divided among half a dozen sects, and "Syrian Christians," the majority (but by no means all) of whom are Catholics owing allegiance to the Pope, trace their origins to Thomas the Apostle. The old joke used to be that the town of Kottayam had more bishops and Christian sects than Jerusalem.

In the outgoing Kerala Assembly, the Indian Union Muslim League was the second largest constituent of Mr Chandy's UDF coalition and held 20 seats

Hindus are divided socially between those who once asserted high status – so-called "caste Hindus" – and groups that were once fiercely discriminated against. Ezhavas and Tiyyas, who make up most of the latter group, account for 20-25 per cent of the population. Nairs, high-status land-controllers in the past, are about 15 per cent; Scheduled Castes (Dalits), about 10 per cent; and Scheduled Tribes just over 1 per cent.

This complex social cocktail has played an important part in generating Kerala's political culture and the so-called "Kerala model of development" – highest literacy, longest life expectancy, most favourable female-to-male ratio, lowest infant mortality and slowest population growth among India's major States. All this happened without a revolution, whether red, green or industrial. Economic development in Kerala has, however, often been below the

national average, and Kerala's per capita State Domestic Product ranks about midway among the Indian States.

The social divisions have helped to produce intensely competitive politics. The LDF looks as if it will win the current election. That, at least, is what opinion polls show. But Kerala's opinion polls, devoured by media-loving Keralites, tend to be half-baked and cooked-up for television. "It's such a sad irony", wrote G Pramod Kumar, "that in a state with near-total literacy, these surveys are lapped up without any debate on the methodologies and their limitations".³

Keralite economist Pulapre Balakrishnan, currently a professor at Ashoka University, observed that neither of the contending alliances addressed two of the State's "most immediate" and related problems: "accumulation of waste" and "depletion of the State's ... natural capital ... Water scarcity is the immediate manifestation".⁴

Kerala is one of the most densely populated areas on earth – about 860 people to a square kilometre. Though Bihar (1100) and West Bengal at (1030) have greater densities, they have much lower standards of living. But for Kerala, a better standard of living is part of the problem. Living better, Keralites create more waste.

Though the State has an enviable record in public health, part of the success generates a different problem. In Kerala, 95 per cent of households have access to a latrine (India: 47 per cent), and open defecation is rare.⁵ Pathogens from faeces are much less likely to reach children, households and kitchens. High levels of female literacy lead to awareness of the need for clean water and hand-washing. One consequence is that Kerala's infant mortality rate is the lowest among India's major States – 12 deaths per 1,000 live births. The all-India rate is 40.⁶

³ *Firstpost*, 26 April 2016, <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/kerala-assembly-elections-opinion-polls-cpm-asianet-news-chandy-poll-time-2749916.html>.

⁴ *Hindu*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/lead-article-by-pulapre-balakrishnan-on-kerala-political-situation-bracing-for-the-status-quo-in-kerala/article8533354.ece>.

⁵ *Census of India 2011*, Houselisting & Housing Census, 2011. Table Hh-14: Percentage of Households to Total Households by Amenities and Assets, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/hlo/HLO_Tables.html.

⁶ National Health Mission, Statewise Information, 2016, http://nrhm.gov.in/nrhm-in-state/state-wise-information/kerala.html#health_profile.

The problem that Professor Balakrishnan alludes to arises here. Most of Kerala's household toilets are not connected to sewers, nor do the contents of so-called "septic tanks" get carted to sewage treatment plants. Instead, they are diverted into neighbourhood waterways. If extracted by a "honeysucker" (a truck designed to clear septic tanks), the truck probably dumps its harvest into rivers, lagoons and backwaters. The nutrients contribute to the algae that clogs Kerala's backwaters and to pollution and environmental degradation that a complex environment such as Kerala can ill-afford.

Kerala governments do not have the financial capability to build the water-treatment infrastructure that 35 million tightly-packed people require. Most revenue goes into maintaining existing payments and services that have underpinned the "Kerala model" for three generations. The State's grandest infrastructure project, the Kochi metro railway due to be in full operation later this year, was one-third financed by the Kerala Government, the balance coming from the Government of India and Japanese and French lenders.

The metro project has been the present government's big success story, whereas efforts to deal with waste and pollution have produced disappointing results. The capital, Thiruvananthapuram, with 1.6 million people living in its neighbourhood, struggles with the garbage generated. A poorly-implemented, intensely-politicized attempt to set up a "scientific landfill" at an outlying village, Vilappilasala, was brought to a halt by the protests of local people. The Supreme Court of India in January rejected a petition to reopen the site.

Lacking consistent policy, local governments struggle to deal with the waste created by a burgeoning throwaway culture and building boom. They try various inconsistent arrangements: roadside burning; underinvested, poorly-managed landfills; contracts with unproved private waste-management companies; and, more promising but more difficult, encouragement of neighbourhood composting and recycling. Trust, investment and leadership are often missing.

Leadership is a key question in the coming poll. If the UDF wins, Mr Chandy no doubt hopes for a second term as Chief Minister, in spite of the allegations and embarrassments focusing on the current government.

The LDF has not announced who its chief minister will be if it wins. That may be because its most popular candidate among Keralites is probably V S Achuthanandan, who will be 93 in

October. Chief Minister of the 2006-11 LDF government, Mr Achuthanandan has a reputation for honesty and austerity, a fact which may account for his popularity with the public and unpopularity among sections of his own party. But he is an unlikely face for a vibrant, forward-looking government.

The LDF harps on corruption as the key issue of the campaign. Mr Chandy's government lost its Finance Minister in November when K M Mani, a legislative presence for more than 50 years, was forced to resign over charges of bribery relating to liquor- and bar-licences. Another corruption storm involved a solar-power scheme and a woman who claimed to be close to Mr Chandy and his family.

To counteract the allegations of slack, corrupt rule, the UDF has put an anti-liquor plank in its platform. The Supreme Court has approved a ban on the sale of liquor in anything except 5-star hotels (the state has fewer than 20). Bars will have to be closed. However, "toddy shops", where an alcoholic beverage derived from the coconut palm is sold, will be allowed to continue.

Kerala's problem with drink has been fostered by two factors that have enabled "the Kerala model" to survive for two generations. The first is the wealth sent home by Keralites working overseas since the 1970s, especially in the Gulf. There were estimated to be 2.4 million Keralites living overseas in 2014.⁷ Their remittances and savings have financed education, health, house building, motor vehicle ownership – and liquor. The leisure that successful Gulf-returned men sometimes enjoy may also have increased the demand for liquor. Whether Keralites are India's largest per-capita consumers of liquor is open to question, but there is no doubt that alcohol often features in daily life in negative ways. All political parties have concluded that Kerala's women voters will endorse an anti-liquor stance.

The other factor in Kerala's liquor equation is tourism. Since the 1980s, Kerala's tropical coast, backwaters and beaches have given rise to a tourist industry that contributes mightily to the State's wealth. In 2014, an estimated 900,000 foreign tourists and 1.7 million Indians visited the State. Tourist operators argue that tourists are turned off by liquor bans and only a minority of tourists stay in 5-star hotels. Liquor bans, they say, will harm tourism.

⁷ K. C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, "Kerala Migration Study 2014," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 February 2016, p. 66.

A further social issue highlighted by the Kerala campaign is the paradoxical absence of women whose votes are eagerly sought since they are a majority of the voters. In 2011, there were 83 women out of 888 candidates, and 60 of them lost their deposit. This year's election does not look much different with only about 40 women nominated by the major parties. This happens in the only major State in India with more women than men. The outcome of the coming election is still in doubt, but there is one reliable prediction: the chief minister after 16 May 2016 may be a nonagenarian but will not be a woman.

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